

## WAR MEMOIRS









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# WAR MEMOIRS

OF

## DAVID LLOYD GEORGE

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## PREFACE

THE first two volumes of my WAR MEMOIRS brought the story up to the end of the Asquith Premiership. Volumes III and IV tell the story of the part played by the Government of which I was the head, up to the end of 1917.

The tale is one which does not always give me any pleasure to tell ; quite the reverse. There is much of it which I wrote with intense reluctance. For I found it necessary in the interests of a truthful record to relate facts which constitute a severe criticism on the action of men whose memory is honoured by their fellow countrymen for many sterling qualities which they possessed in a remarkable degree. My disinclination for revealing to the public unpleasant truths which reflect on distinguished public servants is naturally enhanced by the fact that some of them are no longer present to defend themselves. For that reason I felt disposed to pass on to others the duty of writing the true history of the occurrences recorded in these volumes. But as all these Great War figures had in their lifetime, either themselves or through the agency of authorised substitutes, already given their version of affairs, in which they did not spare those of whom they disapproved—including, nay, especially myself—I felt I was justified in publishing information at my disposal which corrected wrong impressions. Moreover, I took the view that if you accept the

responsibility of writing history, you cannot do so honestly without allocating blame as well as praise, where either is due to the men who take a leading part in the events which make that history. And the right and duty of criticism or approval for their contribution does not cease with their death. Warriors are in that respect in the same category as politicians. Apart from that general consideration, there are at least two imperative reasons why the facts should be told now and not later. It has been sagely remarked by Macaulay that the knowledge of past events "is valuable only as it leads us to form just calculations with respect to the future." The atmosphere of the world—East and West—is charged with the international suspicions, rivalries and fears that have always hitherto ended in war. Nations are arming for war. Every nation throughout the world—almost without exception—is increasing its armaments. Every effort to arrest this menacing expansion of the mechanism of wholesale slaughter has failed. Nations with already enormous armaments are increasing and improving them. Formidable nations that were disarmed, are re-arming. The peoples are making preparations for war in defiance of treaties they signed, and they are doing so with an urgent anxiety that can only be explained by a general fear that war is impending. There is no confidence in any quarter that peace can be long preserved. In these circumstances it is essential first of all that nations should know, before they declare war, to what they are committing themselves. All nations alike enter into a war with an equal confidence in ultimate victory for their banners. Defeat is always a surprise to the vanquished. Elements they had not realised, defects in their own equipment, resources or qualities, or

superiority in those of their foes, which they never suspected, mistakes attributable to inferior leadership which threw away good chances—and finally that play of chance and fate, which no genius can forecast or control, all make the issue of a war as doubtful as that of a serious disease. A good physician may pull through a man with a weak constitution—a poor or second-rate doctor may ruin the chances of a patient with the soundest natural physique. A good cause counts in any struggle, but it is by no means decisive in a particular conflict between right and wrong.

I remember forming one of a delegation of British Ministers (which included Mr. Asquith, Lord Kitchenier, Mr. Balfour, Sir Edward Grey) which attended an important conference at Paris in 1915. When we left for London, M. Combe ("le petit père Combe") came to the station on behalf of the Ministry to see us off. He was a small and vivacious octogenarian whose optimism had not been in the least dimmed by years or by the maledictions of the devout, whom he had offended by his attacks on the Church. As soon as he entered the saloon carriage where we were seated, he started to deliver an oration on the subject of the War and its prospects—all full of hope and confidence. He ended with a peroration about "*Justice, Liberté, le Droit et la Victoire.*" Mr. Balfour regarded the whole performance with ill-concealed disdain and turning to me said: "He must have strangely misread history if he thinks that '*Justice, Liberté, et Droit*' are synonymous with '*Victoire*'."

There is a melancholy justification for this cynicism in the events of the past. Victory may not always go to the big battalions, neither does it invariably incline to the righteous, for it is a historical truism

that a just cause often contends in vain against the superior might or efficiency of its opponents or the weakness or greater stupidity of its adherents. Those who entrust the destiny of their country to war therefor incur unforeseeable risks which may be fatal to them and the land they love. No other arbitrament is so costly in its procedure as well as so uncertain in its event. Let those who doubt this read carefully what happened in the Great War and see how reckless and unintelligent handling brought us almost to the rim of catastrophe, and how we were saved largely by the incredible folly of our foes. But you cannot always rely on your opponents making greater mistakes than your own.

The next lesson is one we must not overlook in a world of armed nations—that if mankind should unhappily fail to abolish war from the category of its visitations, then, if we are involved in another, we must take earnest heed that we do not fall into the errors that cost us so dearly last time. That is also my excuse for giving an account, so detailed as to be tainted with dreariness, of the great improvisations which were set up to organise the resources of the nations for war. A study of these is essential to anyone who wishes to learn how a country can be organised to the best advantage either in War or in Peace.

But, whether in exposition, approbation or condemnation, I must emphasise the importance of this precept—that these lessons cannot be learnt unless they are truthfully taught. If out of respect for honoured memories or cherished delusions, the truth be suppressed and defects hidden under a varnish of glorification, then we shall learn nothing, and if there be a next time we may not then escape disaster



as we did in the last calamity—by a shuddering breadth.

I regret more than words can express the necessity for telling the bare facts of our bloodstained stagger to victory. But I had to tell them or leave unchallenged the supremacy of misleading and therefore dangerous illusions.

I have written of men and events as I saw and thought of them. That may involve criticism where others might praise and commendation where others might attach blame. Where I have indulged in any stricture, I have taken the utmost pains to test the accuracy of my recollection by reference to contemporary documents. I have also consulted men who took an active part in episodes I record. But the pathways and boundaries of memory are so obliterated and confused by time, that the most reliable witness often strays, unless the road is marked out with the "writing that remains." Luckily, I have in my possession—thanks to careful secretaries—a vast number of memoranda, minutes and letters concerning the War and Peace, all written at the time.

The only value which these volumes may possess for the future historian of war will depend upon the memories being genuine and upon the extent to which they are fortified by documentary or other contemporary evidence.

Unfortunately, censure attracts more attention than laudation. I have criticised a few—very few—statesmen and generals. That attracts controversy, and controversy involves a publicity which casts the larger and more important part of the narrative into the shade. If in these pages I have resorted to criticism, I have also recalled with pleasure the great

services of many. Bonar Law, Balfour, Churchill, Cecil, Geddes, Maclay, Reading, Smuts, Borden, Hughes, Milner, Northcliffe, Fisher, Lee of Fareham, are amongst a multitude of statesmen and administrators to whom praise is due and has been accorded without stint. I have dwelt on the successes of Generals like Plumer, Allenby, Maude and Cowans, whose triumphs lit up the dismal narrative of military ineptitude displayed by a few others. There were great figures whose shortcomings added to our difficulties. In their case I have also called attention to the exceptional qualities they possessed. And as to the myriads of officers and men whose incredible valour and endurance saved their country from the consequences of every blunder perpetrated, whether by politicians, generals or admirals, if I have failed in bestowing on them the full measure of praise they merit, it is from lack of adequate power to express the emotion to which I am moved by a renewed contemplation of their heroism.

*Bron-y-de,  
Churt.*

D. LLOYD GEORGE.

1934.

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# WAR MEMOIRS

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### FIRST TASKS AS PRIME MINISTER

#### I. FORMATION OF A NATIONAL THREE-PARTY GOVERNMENT

As soon as the King entrusted me with the task of forming an Administration in succession to the Ministry that had disappeared, I had to survey the tasks awaiting me, political as well as economic, financial, military and naval, and then pass in review the personnel available for such a Government, in order to select men who were suitable for the emergency with which we were confronted. Had my hands been free, the men I thought best fitted to assist me in counsel and in the effective organisation of the Nation for war would have been chosen without reference to Party politics. I should have drawn my Ministers partly from the ranks of the back-benchers, some of whom had made a mark in Parliament, some of whom had no conspicuous Parliamentary gifts, but who possessed, I felt confident, the experience and qualities which would make them good administrators. I should also have looked outside Parliament for men who in their own pursuits had shown faculties of energy, foresight,

imagination, judgment and courage, and I should have put them in charge of various branches of Government activity.

But I had to take into account the fundamental fact that I was working under a Parliamentary system, and that it was essential for the Government to secure the support of Parliament during the first testing months, when its schemes were developing but could not hope to fructify in any decisive achievement. Had there been a united party behind me which, with dependable allies, would have commanded in the House of Commons a majority solid and large enough to carry me through the inevitable vicissitudes of evil as well as good tidings for a period of two years and more, I should have had a freer, a wider and a more promising choice. I could then have secured a more homogeneous form of Government and a Government more sympathetic to the War policy in which I believed. I was anxious to change the men and methods which were too much associated with the old war direction.

But the party to which I belonged was divided into two parts. On a canvass undertaken by Dr. Addison with the help of the late Mr. Kellaway, it was ascertained that there were 136 Liberals out of a total 260 who were prepared to support an Administration of which I was the head. That meant that about half of the Party still followed the lead of Mr. Asquith. The Irish Party were on the whole Asquithian, and the Labour Party were divided between supporters of the War and the out-and-out pacifists.

The majority of the Tory Ministers in the Asquith coalition were definitely opposed to my Premiership.

When they first realised that it was impending they made hysterical efforts to fend it off. When it became a fact, they accepted the prospect of serving under my leadership with bitter reluctance. As to some of them, there was no time up to the end when they would not have welcomed my resignation. That added to my difficulties in moments calling for critical decision, and their attitude impeded and once or twice thwarted my efforts. To understand their attitude it was necessary to bear in mind that there had never before been a "ranker" raised to the Premiership--certainly not one except Disraeli who had not passed through the Staff College of the old Universities.

As to the attitude of the Labour Party, I had as yet no information, inasmuch as I had not come into contact with them either directly or indirectly during the negotiations. All I knew was that in Asquithian circles there was the most complete confidence that no Tory leader except Bonar Law and Carson would serve under me, and that the Labour Party would have nothing to do with a Lloyd George administration.

The prospect of success in the formation of a Ministry assured of reliable Parliamentary support was therefore at that period not encouraging. The prospect of life for the Government was placed in influential circles at six weeks. However, I decided to undertake the duty entrusted to me by the Sovereign and to do my best to form a Government that would organise the strength of the Nation for victory and thus gradually command its confidence. I felt strongly that failure would mean that the kind of flabby direction which had jeopardised the chance of

*Unpromising  
outlook*

a favourable issue out of the War would be restored to power with added authority, but with diminished vigour and initiative.

I started by trying to find out what Conservative support was available, and herein I had to depend upon the superior knowledge and experience of Mr. Bonar Law and Lord Edmund Talbot. I have already told the story of how we secured the powerful adhesion of Mr. Balfour, who undertook to fill the position of Foreign Secretary. There were two other able men of great influence in the Party who were also ready to assist the new Administration—Sir Edward Carson and Lord Milner. As soon as I was assured of this support I felt confident that my task would be accomplished. In most Governments there are four or five outstanding figures who by exceptional talent, experience, and personality constitute the inner council which gives direction to the policy of a Ministry. An administration that is not fortunate enough to possess such a group may pull through without mishap in tranquil seasons, but in an emergency it is hopelessly lost. The rest do not count in a crisis. The hummocks that look like eminences in fine weather are quickly submerged in a great flood, when the highest peaks alone are visible above the surface of the waters.

*Securing the  
Conservative  
leaders*

*A few  
outstanding  
figures*

In the Liberal Party there were three or four Ministers, and no more, whose names meant anything to the general public—Mr. Asquith, Lord Grey, and Mr. Winston Churchill. Without any undue presumption I may also add my own name at that date, largely owing to the part I had taken in establishing Old Age Pensions and a national

system of Insurance, and to the fact that I had during recent years been in the forefront of all the political controversies of the day. The residuc were known to Parliamentarians and to keen politicians outside ; but I doubt whether one in ten of the men in the trenches could tell you what office they held or even to what Party they belonged.

The men known to the general public amongst Conservatives were also few. Foremost amongst them were Mr. Bonar Law, Mr. Balfour, and Sir Edward Carson. These were prominent figures as far as the nation at large was concerned. Several others were more or less known to those who were interested in politics ; Lord Curzon, Mr. Walter Long, Mr. Austen Chamberlain, and Lord Robert Cecil stood high in the councils of the Party, while Lord Milner made a special appeal to the young intelligentsia. The Diehard element also trusted him in the essentials of the faith. That is more than could be said of Lord Curzon, who inspired a distrust which in some not uninfluential Tory quarters amounted to detestation. Incidentally it was this bloc which ultimately barred his way to Premiership in 1923.

Lord Lansdowne was one of the elder statesmen of the Party who was more respected than followed. His sword was never very formidable in action ; it was now only useful to return the salute. The direction in which it was waveringly pointed was no longer heeded by the exclusive regiment he once led. Bonar Law, Carson and Balfour between them commanded the trust and obedience of every section of the Party, and where they went on any patriotic enterprise which did not cross a fundamental Tory principle, the whole Party would follow. The

fact that the other leaders, whose names I have given, were not associated with the venture, would not have seriously disturbed Tory sentiment or weakened its adhesion to the new Government. From the point of view of the rigorous and effective prosecution of the War, there was much to be said for leaving them out. Men who come into a joint enterprise reluctantly and resentfully will, if they are honest workers—and these were—fulfil their tasks to the best of their ability. but their doubts usually revive when there are difficulties, and when decision depends on faith in leadership they are a source of irresolution. Many a time during the coming years did I find that this condition of mind in some of my leading lieutenants weakened and postponed and now and again frustrated essential action. This was notably the case in dealing with the vital questions of wasteful offensives and of Unity of Command. I found that the men in question always leant towards support of the military hierarchy in opposition to the view I took. Had they remained outside, their positions could have been filled by men of the type of Maclay, Inverforth, Beaverbrook, Geddes, Lee, Weir, Rhondda, Cowdray, Albert Stanley—men who possessed organising brains of the first order, and whose services to the nation during the War have never been fully appreciated. However, events circumscribed my choice of colleagues.

Mr. Bonar Law, in addition to being a strong Party man, felt that he had a special trust to discharge as the leader of his Party, and that he had not the same freedom to dispense with Party considerations in the choice of Ministers as had been vouchsafed to me

*Doubtful  
value of some  
recruits*

*Bonar Law's  
loyalty to Party  
colleagues*

by the circumstances of my Party. He therefore felt that in order to avoid splitting his Party he was under an obligation to do all in his power to bring his colleagues, the Conservative ex-Ministers, inside the new Coalition. Of the steps he took to induce them to remain at the posts they held, or their equivalent, I shall give an account later on.

In this connection I quote the following characteristic letter which I received from the late *Leo Maxse's* Mr. Leo Maxse. I think there is a good *view* deal in what he said :

“ *National Review*,  
43, Duke Street,  
St. James's, London, S.W.  
8th December, 1916.

Dear Mr. Lloyd George,

I have little hopes of this reaching you or being read by you, but I must write one line because I am appalled by what I hear as to the manner in which you are being blackmailed by Unionist Front Bench politicians, into making numerous undesirable appointments, which when announced cannot fail to cause a great shock to the public by making them feel that the new Government is very little improvement to the old. . . .

Anxious as we are to be quit of the debris which encumbered the late Prime Minister we are hardly less anxious to be rid of the equally useless rubbish by which Bonar Law is surrounded, and there is really no earthly reason from any point of view why politicians whose ‘ numbers ’ have long been ‘ up ’ should be allowed to inflict themselves on the community. All you have to do, if I may say so, is to tell Bonar Law and Co. to go to the devil and they will come to heel. I know these men well

—they have not an ounce of pluck and they are only brave when they are successfully applying the squeeze. The public is expecting something much better than a Cabinet of political hacks who have long been blown upon.

Yours sincerely,

L. J. MAXSE."

This was a shrapnel shot intended to hit Balfour, Curzon, Walter Long and Robert Cecil.

As the change could not have been effected without the intervention of Mr. Bonar Law, I felt that I must abide by his decision in the selection of Conservative Ministers. Subsequently, I had much reason to deplore his loyalty to colleagues who were not conspicuously faithful to him and who, even in these negotiations, had tried to snatch leadership out of his hands.

I felt it was a matter of the first national importance to bring the Labour Party into active co-operation with the new Government. This was the first Great War since the American War of the Union in which whole democracies were engaged in a deadly struggle. As far as the Western Allies were concerned, this was truly a democratic war. It was entered into with the full assent of practically the whole of the people. Their sons without distinction of rank, grade or vocation fought and suffered. It was necessary in order to win that workers at home should put forth the whole of their strength. To do so it was essential that their co-operation should be enlisted and retained right to the end. I could see no prospect of bringing the War to a satisfactory end for some time to come. War weariness was bound to grow. The national

*Importance  
of Labour  
support*



will was unbroken, but the national ardour did not flame out as it did during the first months of the War. In these circumstances it is not surprising that labour troubles were on the increase.

Britain was in this respect no exception to the other belligerent countries. Allied and enemy countries alike were beginning to experience the irritation arising from war weariness amongst the workers. The factories and workshops of Russia were seething with discontent. The German worker was showing symptoms of the querulousness of overstrain. In neither of these two countries did the rulers bring the spokesmen of Labour frankly into active partnership, and the failure to do so ended in disaster for both, soon in Russia, later in Germany. I deemed it essential to forestall trouble by bringing the Labour leaders into more active and effective co-operation with the Government of the day in the prosecution of the War. In the late Coalition there was only one Labour Minister—Mr. Arthur Henderson—and he was not a member of the War Committee. I came to the conclusion that Labour must have a more substantial and effective representation in the new Government and that one of its most prominent and respected leaders should be a member of the small body which had the supreme direction of the War. But first of all it was necessary that the Labour Party should express its willingness to co-operate.

On the morrow of my visit to the Palace, Mr. Arthur Henderson called on me at the War Office and asked me whether I was prepared to meet a deputation from the Parliamentary Labour Party and the National Labour Executive to discuss the conditions of possible participation in my Government.

He had been invited by Mr. Asquith to attend the conclave of Liberal Ministers which decided not to serve in any Government of which the late Prime Minister was not the Chief. *Negotiations with the Labour Party* Mr. Henderson was the sole dissident when that resolution was passed. He immediately consulted his Labour colleagues as to the course to be adopted. He informed me that the Labour Executive had discussed the question of whether they should support or oppose the Government, that they were divided on the subject, but that before coming to any final decision on the matter, they were anxious to have my views on two or three issues which particularly concerned them. I readily agreed to meet the representatives of Labour, and later on they came to me at the War Office. All the best known Socialist and Labour leaders were present, including Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, Mr. Snowden, Mr. Henderson, Mr. Sidney Webb, Mr. J. H. Thomas and Mr. Bevin.

I was subjected to a good deal of examination and cross-examination. The Labour Party were by no means completely united in their general attitude towards the War. Broadly speaking, I found at this interview that the Trade Union representatives were in favour of an effective prosecution of the War up to the attainment of victory. On the other hand, there was a strong pacifist element amongst the Socialist section. The spokesmen of the latter—especially Mr. Ramsay MacDonald and Mr. Sidney Webb—took an active part in the process of putting questions which they thought might be embarrassing to the new administration, and the answers to which might ensure a refusal to support the Government.

It was apparent to me that their hostility evoked no sympathy amongst their Trade Union colleagues.

I opened the proceedings by addressing them on the position of the War, and upon the general outline of my own policy as Prime Minister.

*My address to the Labour Party Executive* As there has been a good deal of discussion of a recriminatory character about the conditions under which organised Labour entered the Cabinet, it is only fair to the majority who gave their adhesion to the new Government that I should quote textually from the official record of the proceedings at that fateful interview. The following passage from my speech to the delegation will illustrate the position which I then took, and to which I faithfully adhered.

“ . . . The War for the moment is going badly ; the country and all the nations which hang upon the triumph of Great Britain are in great peril. The fall of Bucharest is not merely a question of one city passing into the hands of the enemy ; it means a good deal more than that ; it means that for the moment, the blockade is broken, the work of the Fleet to that extent neutralised, and that we are face to face with the grimmest and most perilous struggle in which this country has ever been engaged. I felt that we were not waging this war in the way wars alone can be waged. I hate war ; I abominate it. I sometimes think ‘ Am I dreaming ? Is it a nightmare ? It cannot be fact.’ But these are questions to ask and answer before you go into a war ; once you are in it you have to go grimly through it, otherwise the causes which hang upon a successful issue will all perish.

Delay in war is as fatal as in an illness. An operation which may succeed to-day is no good six weeks later or, may be, even three days later. So in war. Action which *Delay is fatal* to-day may save the life of a country, taken a week later is too late. I thought, rightly or wrongly, that there was delay, hesitation and vacillation, and that we were not waging this war with the determination, promptitude and relentlessness—let us make no mistake about it—with which it must be waged. We cannot send men to carnage without seeing that at any rate everything is being done to give them a fair chance to win through to victory. They are prepared to make the sacrifice, and we, on the other hand, must support them with all the strength and all the will with which we are endowed. So it was I made certain proposals. I do not believe any Prime Minister, whoever he is, if he has the strength of a giant mentally and physically and morally, can possibly undertake the task of running Parliament and running the War. That is the conviction that I have received. I am still of the same opinion, and I shall certainly act upon it if I form an Administration. Whoever undertakes to run the War must put his whole strength into it and he must make other arrangements with regard to Parliament. The King having failed to secure the adhesion of all parties—I wish myself there were no parties during the War—to the plan of forming a comprehensive national Government, invited me to form an Administration. Mr. Asquith and his colleagues decided that they would not serve under Mr. Bonar Law or under anyone else. I regret that, but I do not wish to criticise it at the present

moment. The King's Government must be carried on. You must have an Administration to prosecute the War, and let me say this—it is what I have said to my colleagues and comrades in this office a few minutes ago—politicians make one fundamental mistake when they have been in office. They think that the people who are in office, or who have been in office, are absolutely essential to the Government of the country and that no one else is in the least able to carry on affairs. Well, we are a people of 45,000,000 and really, if we cannot produce at least two or three alternative Cabinets, we must be what Carlyle once called us—‘a nation of fools.’ I don't believe it and I don't think that is the opinion of the country. We are all very interested in ourselves and each other, but with all respect to ourselves I think the country is looking out for something else : it is looking out for a Government that will prosecute the War efficiently ; that is what it is looking for and therefore I am hoping to get the adhesion of men of that character and calibre to form an Administration.

It is obvious that no Government can be carried on in this country, whether during war or peace, without, I won't say the support of Labour, but the co-operation of Labour. Upon its determination to help in winning this War, everything depends, and therefore I invited you here, through Mr. Henderson, who has been my colleague for eighteen months or two years, and let me say at once that I never want a more loyal colleague. He has faced tasks which I thought were difficult, but which were twice as difficult for him because of his

*Labour  
co-operation  
vital*

association with Labour. He has faced them with courage and very true comradeship and I shall always be grateful to him. I invited him to communicate with the leaders of Labour in this country with a view to inviting their co-operation in the Government of the country—not a subordinate position, but a real share in the War Committee, to direct the War ; a real share in the Administration by those who are not members of the War Committee, because those members of the War Committee ought on the whole to be free from the burdens of departmental work. It is absolutely impossible otherwise to give the whole of their mind to the prosecution of the War, and I propose that Labour—as I did propose before I left the late Cabinet—should be represented on that Council, and that it should have its representatives there permanently, taking an equal share of the burdens and contributing to the counsels upon which the success, the life of this country may depend. I propose that Labour should be represented in other Departments. Up to the present we have only one Labour head of a

*Proposed new  
Labour  
Ministry*

Department. . . . I suggest an absolutely new Department—a Ministry of Labour—that the Labour Department of the Board of Trade and the Labour Department of the Ministry of Munitions should be consolidated under one head. . . . I think it is essential that you should have a Labour Ministry which could incorporate the Labour section of the Board of Trade and Ministry of Munitions under one head. That Department would certainly be one of the most important Departments in the Government because, however important a Labour

Ministry would be in time of peace—and it would essentially be a Department whose decisions would very materially affect the lives of millions of people in this country—in times of war it is almost doubly important. It is a War Ministry to that extent as well as a Labour Ministry. I propose that that Department should have at its head a Labour representative.

Then there is another Ministry which I propose to form, to deal with a subject which, at the present moment, affects hundred. of thousands of households and which, it is sad to reflect, will affect the lives of many hundreds of thousands more. I refer to the Pensions Department. I care not to think how important the Department is and is going to continue to be. It is also a Department which I should suggest should be under the control of a Labour representative.

Then I propose that there should be two Under-Secretaries and a representative of Labour in the Whips' Office as well. That is the suggestion which I put before Mr. Henderson.

With regard to the Cabinet—there is a suggestion which is before us, but I am not in a position to say whether it will be decided upon or not—it is one of the things I shall have to discuss with my colleagues before I give an opinion. I do not think there should be a Cabinet in the ordinary sense of the term. The War Committee should, during the continuation of the War, act as the Cabinet. Whenever a question arises, affecting a particular Department the representatives of that Department would be called in to discuss the matter with the War Cabinet. . . .

As regards the question of policy, there are three questions to be dealt with, namely Mines, Food and Shipping.

As regards Mines, there is only one solution and that is that the State should have control over the mines. On this question, however, I shall have to discuss details further with my colleagues. The control of the mines should be nationalised as far as possible. There would be no question of profiting at the expense of the general public ; the profits would be reckoned on a pre-War basis.

Personally I am strongly in favour of the same line being taken with Shipping. I have heard of scandalous cases in regard to Shipping -- cases of men who at the beginning of the War had practically nothing and who now find themselves not merely with thousands, but very nearly hundreds of thousands, made by the most extravagant freights, which have had the effect of putting up the cost of living throughout the country. I think that is a scandal, and I cannot conceive the Government proceeding without dealing with that matter. There I can only speak for myself and Mr. Bonar Law. The suggestion which I put forward in the late Cabinet was that there should be a Minister to control Shipping and Shipbuilding. As regards Shipping profits, Mr. Bonar Law and three or four of my colleagues are strongly in favour of Railway and Mine terms being applied to Shipping."

On the question of Food Supplies I promised to appoint a Controller to supervise production and distribution.



I then continued :—

“ I do not believe there is a country in the world with so much good land which is not producing.

*Food control and land development* I remember talking with a very distinguished German in Strassburg (before the War) and he told me that in going through England, *nothing impressed him so much as the tremendous beauty of the country—except the waste of it.* He said that in England he saw everywhere good land which was producing nothing but neglected grass, and trees which were useless for timber. In Germany every yard of such land was producing food. And during this War at any rate—and we will see afterwards what we shall do—the food capacity of this country ought to be utilised to the very last inch without any regard at all to the uses, ornamental or otherwise, to which it has been hitherto put. At the present moment, I do not believe anyone would object to it.

The second thing is that you cannot do that without a great deal of mechanical appliances for cultivation. You must first of all find out how many steam ploughs there are in this country, and having done this you must see that they are utilised to the best advantage. I mean that a man who has got a plough must use that plough whenever it is needed for the parish. The plough must be used to the fullest possible extent. We must manufacture ploughs, and arrangements will be made with the Ministry of Munitions (this was agreed to in substance by the War Committee) to manufacture ploughs for the purpose of tearing up the soil and making it ready for food production. Agricultural labour has also to be mobilised.

I believe there are plenty of skilled men on the soil if you make the best use of them. It is just what you are doing with the Army—making the skilled soldier your non-commissioned officer. Doing that you will be able to increase enormously the produce of the soil.

There is another suggestion I was discussing with Lord Derby the other day. I am told there are 100,000 gardeners in this country. Those are all skilled cultivators of the soil and, I think, in a case of necessity, when the food supply may become absolutely short, if the submarine losses continue, you ought not to allow one of these men to cultivate anything which is ornamental, until they have utilised to the fullest their powers for the production of food. I do not believe any man who is now employed on Agriculture, will object to the mobilisation of those highly skilled men for the purpose, not of tidying up the lawn or even producing flowers, but for the purpose of increasing the food supply of the people. It is better that you should produce it at home. Any man who has lived in the country, knows that the food which is grown at his own door is a luxury compared with what you buy. I do not believe there is a village in this country that ought not to be self-supporting. Go back to the days of your boyhood. Every farmer gave potato ground and vegetable ground to anybody whose wife came and helped on the farm during the harvest. It was a good bargain—there was no need for buying any foodstuffs then, except groceries such as tea and sugar, which came from abroad. Each village was almost entirely self-supporting. I am perfectly certain that if there were a great organisation for

the utilisation of the labour of this country in that way, you would be able to make Britain not quite self-supporting, but very near it, with one additional proviso. You must ration.

*A system of rationing* If you don't ration, what happens?

The price of food begins to do it for you. What does that mean? The rich man can always buy anything he likes, but the more he buys, the less there will be for the others, and those who are lower down on the scale of comforts will get less than their fair share, whilst the others will get far more. It would be a very good thing to have a National Lent. The Catholic Religion is, I think, the most complete study of human nature that has ever been presented to the world, and when it declares its Lent, there is a good deal of practical common sense in it. It is not merely good morally, but it is good physically, and I am perfectly certain that a rationing system of Lent, which would be appropriate during the horrors of war, would make us feel that at any rate we were making some contribution in suffering discomfort at home. War must be brought home to nations. Everybody must put up with some deprivation, either in the way of discomfort or very often of loss. I would certainly urge that there should be a very complete system of rationing which gives plenty but forbids waste, and everybody must be put on the same footing. I ventured to say in February, 1915, that we were laughing too much at Germany's potato rations. I said then, and I repeat it to-day, that the potato spirit in Germany was more formidable than von Hindenburg's leadership. It was the determination to see their country through, whatever it would

victory which would enable us to dictate our own terms of peace, or whether we would at any time give favourable consideration to reasonable proposals which might be put forward either by neutrals or by the enemy, I said that if the proposals made were reasonable, we would listen to them at this moment, and that surely no one imagined that we wanted to go on with the War and have our own sons killed. Before we entered into negotiations with Germany, we must have a clear idea of what she meant, and I thought every sensible man who wanted a good peace would be of the same opinion.

On being asked if the proposed new Cabinet of four members would mean that we should have four dictators, I said: What is a *Relations of Cabinet and Ministry* Government for except to dictate? If it does not dictate, it is not a Government, and whether it is four or twenty-three, the only difference is that four would take less time than twenty-three.

I went on to say that each man in his own Department would be dictator, and the only reason for cutting the Cabinet down to four was because with a larger number of people it meant so many men, so many minds; so many minds, so many tongues; so many tongues, so much confusion; so much confusion, so much delay.

I was asked whether it was understood that in the new Cabinet to be formed, the Labour Party in the House would be represented and whether, when peace negotiations were discussed, it would take part in them.

I said that Mr. Henderson had already answered that question that morning. I thought that peace

was a long way off yet, but I sincerely hoped that when the time came there would be a Labour representative at the conference.

Referring to the four members of the Cabinet and the Labour representative—I said that I had come to the conclusion that there must be a Labour Member of the Cabinet without portfolio in order to give his whole time to the War Council.

The deputation then retired. I understood that subsequently there was a very heated discussion as to whether the Party should accept the invitation which I extended to it, to co-operate actively in the War direction by permitting some of its leading members to join the Government. By a majority of one the Labour Executive decided to join the Administration during the period of the War. I ascertained that Mr. J. H. Thomas, who had voted against Labour joining the Asquith Coalition, on this occasion voted for participation. What made the change in his attitude more significant and honourable was the fact that he refused to accept office himself.

The Labour decision assured the success of my task in the formation of a truly National Ministry. When it became known that the most powerful Conservative leaders had already accepted posts in the Government; that I had assurance of support from one-half of the Liberal Party; and that the Labour Party had decided to come in, Mr. Bonar Law experienced no difficulty in persuading the recalcitrant Conservative Ministers to overcome their reluctance to take office under my Premiership.

Soon after the Labour decision became known, on the evening of the 7th December I received

Lord Curzon, Lord Robert Cecil, Mr. Austen Chamberlain, and Mr. Walter Long, at an interview at the War Office—as they put it “to discuss certain matters in connection with the proposed arrangements.”

*Negotiations  
with  
Conservatives*

Here is the Minute they subsequently published of what took place at the interview.

“The Unionist ex-Ministers stressed the supreme necessity of setting up a stable Administration, and enquired what support the Prime Minister would count on from Liberal and Labour Parties. The P.M. told them that while the Liberal ex-Cabinet Ministers were understood to have promised Mr. Asquith not to join him, 136 Liberal M.P.’s had promised him their support, and that at least as large a section of the Labour Party had agreed to support the P.M. as had previously backed Mr. Asquith’s Coalition. The P.M. gave particulars of his meeting with the Labour Party, and of the agreement he had reached with them, alike as to their representation in the new Government and as to its policy on matters which specially affected their interests. The new Government was assured of a favourable reception from the House of Commons, and if difficulties arose later, he would not shrink from the issue of a General Election.

We discussed in some detail the proposed constitution of the new Government, and reached full agreement as to the principle of making the Cabinet a small War Committee of Ministers without portfolio, sitting daily to deal with the War. The personnel of the proposed Cabinet was also agreed, as were the other Ministerial appointments which the P.M. had in view.

Among other matters discussed were the control of the Press, and our policy regarding Ireland ; the extension of the Franchise ; and the Army command. He discouraged any hasty measures of Press restriction. He announced that he was free from commitments to the Irish Members, and that the hands of the Government would in no way be tied on this issue, nor on other controversial issues such as the Franchise. *He proposed to make no change in the Army Command for the present.*

At the end of our conversation, the Unionist ex-Ministers stated their willingness to accept office under him, and he told them he could now inform the King forthwith of his readiness to accept the duty of forming an Administration.

Their anxiety that there should be no change in the Army Command was a clear indication of the difficulty I was to experience in controlling the Army Chiefs.

As I pointed out to the Labour deputation, I had decided to make one fundamental change in the constitution of the Cabinet. I had long come to the conclusion that a body of 20 Members was a futile instrument for the conduct of any business which required immediate action. I ultimately resolved to set up a Cabinet of five to whom the whole control of the War should be entrusted. I felt that they must remain in almost constant session to review events from day to day. Ministers who were in charge of Departments could rarely be available for purposes of consultation, and their minds would naturally be taken up with the innumerable details of their respective Offices. The War Cabinet must therefore

*Reasons for  
adopting small  
War Cabinet*

consist of men who were free from all departmental cares, and who could devote the whole of their time and thought to the momentous questions which were involved in the successful direction of a world war. When matters arose which affected any particular Department, the Head of that Department could be summoned to attend the Cabinet, bringing with him appropriate experts. It was made quite clear that the Cabinet would have the same direct access to these experts as their Departmental Chiefs ; that questions could be addressed to them directly ; and that they were to speak their minds freely without awaiting the permission or opinion of their political Chiefs.

I had a painful recollection of the Dardanelles muddle, where distinguished experts sat silent and sullen at the War Committee whilst their Chief was advancing propositions with which they profoundly disagreed. They might as well never have attended our sittings. I felt that it was essential that the Cabinet should know quite as much as the Ministers concerned about the personal opinions of the men who were advising them, and who had a first-hand knowledge of the problems and difficulties.

The first War Cabinet consisted of myself, Lord Curzon, Mr. Henderson, Lord Milner, and Mr. Bonar Law. It was also understood that *Members of the Cabinet* Mr. Balfour should be called into council not only whenever any question arose which affected the Foreign Office, but regularly when he could spare time from his departmental duties. I felt that his unique experience and penetrating intellect would be invaluable in council and that as far as the details of his office were concerned, they could be effectively discharged by his assistant, Lord Robert Cecil.



I realised that I should have to devote the whole of my time to war problems, and that it would be impossible for me, except on certain occasions, to attend the House of Commons. It was therefore agreed that the leadership of the House should be entrusted to Mr. Bonar Law. As I said in the House of Commons, "there would be a Cabinet of five with one of its Members doing sentry duty outside, manning the walls and defending the Council Chamber against attack while we were trying to do our work inside." That did not mean that I did not put in an appearance in the House of Commons. I attended almost daily to answer important questions, and there was hardly a debate of any consequence at which I was not present and did not take part. But leadership of the House of Commons means a good deal more than that. It calls for constant attendance and attention inside the walls of the Palace of Westminster. This I could not give.

*Mr. Bonar  
Law to lead  
the House*

I did my best to persuade him to withdraw his objection and I urged the argument which is usually advanced on these occasions, that Mr. Churchill would be more dangerous as a critic than as a Member of the Government. I remem-

*Mr. Bonar Law's views* ber saying to him that when I was practising as a solicitor one of my most responsible duties was the choice of

Counsel in an important case. There was the type of man whom you could always depend upon to do his best for the client—and his best was of the very best at the Bar. On the other hand, there was the man of brilliant parts who on his day was even more formidable. His judgment, however, could never be quite depended upon. He was apt either in cross-examination or in speech to be guilty of an indiscretion which would ruin his client's chances. The difficulty in regard to him always was that if you left him out of your team, the other side might brief him and get the benefit of one of his reliable exhibitions of talent, and then I said the question one always had to put to oneself was this: "Is he more dangerous when he is FOR you than when he is AGAINST you?" When I put it in this way to Mr. Bonar Law, his reply was: "I would rather have him against us every time."

I deeply regretted this attitude, but I could not risk a break up of the political combination which was an essential foundation of the Government, for the sake of an immediate inclusion of Mr. Churchill in the Ministry. A few months later I was able to appoint him to the headship of the Ministry of Munitions. Even then the Tory antipathy to him was so great that for a short while the very existence of the Government was in jeopardy.

Here are some samples of the objections advanced at that later time by my colleagues. One of them wrote:—

*Typical protests* “ May I again and for the last time urge you to think well before you make the appointment (W. Ch.) which we have more than once discussed? It will be an appointment intensely unpopular with many of your chief colleagues—in the opinion of some of whom it will lead to the disruption of the Government at an early date, even if it does not lead, as it may well do, to resignations now. X— who opened the subject to me of his own accord this evening and who has spoken to you, tells me that it will be intensely unpopular in the Army.

I have reason to believe the same of the Navy. . . .

He is a potential danger in opposition. In the opinion of all of us he will as a member of the Government be an active danger in our midst.”

Another Minister wrote at the same time : “ Apart from every other consideration, is it wise for you to have as one of your Ministers, a dangerously ambitious man? . . . ” And another important Conservative Minister wrote me in a similar strain :— “ As regards W. Churchill and the Government, I have made enquiries and from what Z— tells me I am satisfied it would bring about a very grave situation in our Party. . . . ”

*Reasons for Tory antipathy* Why were they so bitter and implacable? His political record naturally exasperated his old Party. He does nothing by halves, and when he left it he attacked his old associates and condemned his old principles with a vigour and a witty scorn which rankled.

When War was declared the national peril constrained all parties into a temporary truce, in which party ranks and party rancours were for the time being overlooked or ignored. But Conservatives could not forgive nor forget Churchill's desertion to their enemies, and his brisk and deadly firing into their ranks at a moment when their rout had begun. Had he remained a faithful son of the political household in which he was born and brought up, his share in the Dardanelles fiasco would have been passed over and another sacrifice would have been offered up to appease the popular anger. There was an abundant choice from which the altar could have been supplied. His mistakes gave resentful Tories an irresistible opportunity for punishing rank treason to their party, and the lash which drove Churchill out of office, although knotted with the insults he had hurled at them, was wielded with an appearance of being applied not by vindictive partisans but by dutiful patriots.

For days I discussed with one or other of my colleagues Churchill, his gifts, his shortcomings, his mistakes, especially the latter. Some of them were more excited about his appointment than about the War. It was a serious crisis. It was interesting to observe in a concentrated form every phase of the distrust and trepidation with which mediocrity views genius at close quarters. Unfortunately, genius always provides its critics with material for censure—it always has and always will. Churchill is certainly no exception to this rule.

They admitted he was a man of dazzling talents, that he possessed a forceful and a fascinating personality. They recognised his courage and that he was an indefatigable worker. But they asked why,

in spite of that, although he had more admirers, he had fewer followers than any prominent public man in Britain? They pointed to the fact that *His admitted ability* at the lowest ebb of their fortunes, Joseph Chamberlain in Birmingham and Campbell-Bannerman in Scotland could count on a territorial loyalty which was unshakable in its devotion. On the other hand, Churchill had never attracted, he had certainly never retained, the affection of any section, province or town. His changes of Party were not entirely responsible for this. Some of the greatest figures in British political life had ended in a different Party from that in which they commenced their political career. That was therefore not an adequate explanation of his position in public confidence. They asked : What then was the reason ?

Here was their explanation. His mind was a powerful machine, but there lay hidden in its material or its make-up some obscure defect which prevented it from always running true. *A defect in the machine* They could not tell what it was. When the mechanism went wrong, its very power made the action disastrous, not only to himself but to the causes in which he was engaged and the men with whom he was co-operating. That was why the latter were nervous in his partnership. He had in their opinion revealed some tragic flaw in the metal. This was urged by Churchill's critics as a reason for not utilising his great abilities at this juncture. They thought of him not as a contribution to the common stock of activities and ideas in the hour of danger, but as a further danger to be guarded against.

I took a different view of his possibilities. I felt that his resourceful mind and his tireless energy

would be invaluable under supervision. That he had vision and imagination, no one could doubt.

*My appreciation of his value* The Dardanelles idea (apart from its execution), and his early discernment of the value of tanks clearly demonstrated his possession of these faculties. Men with

such gifts are rare—very rare. In an emergency they ought to be utilised to the full, and if you keep a vigilant eye on their activities, they are a greater asset than a legion of the conventional sort.

That is why I thought he ought to be employed. I knew something of the feeling against him amongst his old Conservative friends, and that I would run great risks in promoting Churchill to any position in the Ministry; but the insensate fury they displayed when later on the rumour of my intention reached their ears surpassed all my apprehensions, and for some days it swelled to the dimensions of a grave ministerial crisis which threatened the life of the Government. I took the risk, and although I had occasionally some reason to regret my trust, I am convinced I was right to overrule the misgivings of my colleagues, for Churchill rendered conspicuous service in further increasing the output of munitions when an overwhelming supply was essential to victory. As to Churchill's future, it will depend on whether he can establish a reputation for prudence without losing audacity.

*Objections to other Liberal leaders* As to the rest of the Liberal Ministers, I felt that none of them could have contributed anything in ideas or energy comparable with the men whom I had in my mind selected to fill the vacancies created by the retirement of these Liberals from office. Mr. M'Kenna would have been plainly impossible, for he was the

prime mover in the intrigues that precipitated the break-up of the Asquith Coalition. Apart from that, he had defeatist propensities which would have weakened a Government called into being for the more vigorous prosecution of the War.

This latter observation would have been equally applicable to Mr. Runciman. Moreover, in a Government where prompt and effective action was the dominant aim, he would not have found a suitable niche.

*Characteristics of Mr. Runciman* Although he is a man of high intelligence, there is a lack of continuity and persistent application which has always accounted for his failure to achieve any distinguished success in any of the various offices which he has held. He never follows through. The energy and mastery which he succeeds in conveying in his speeches evaporate before they are translated into masterful action. His most conspicuous attribute is a glib inefficacy, which can explain and expound with forcible and relevant fluency what he is after and why he has never got it. He has a perfect command of the whole jargon of business, and he flips it about in his speeches with a dexterity which awes the ignorant and impresses even the proficient. There he excels and there he also ends.

After the last Cabinet he ever attended Lord Kitchener walked across with me to the Ministry of Munitions.

*Lord Kitchener's view of him* It was his first and last visit to that Department. Mr. Runciman had taken a conspicuous part in a discussion at the Cabinet meeting. On my referring to the clarity with which he had put his case, Lord Kitchener observed : " No man in the Cabinet has disappointed me as much as Runciman. When I first joined the Cabinet he came to me and said that

he would very much like to offer his services to me in any direction where his acquaintance with the commercial community would be helpful. I was very grateful and thought it was exceedingly kind of him to tender his assistance. I had spent most of my life in the East, and therefore I had no opportunity of coming into contact with the industrial activities of this country. I asked him to help me in several matters where I lacked experience and knowledge. He readily agreed to do so. More particularly I remember how I asked him to aid me in organising the engineering capacity of this country for the production of war material. Runciman said: 'You need not bother about that—leave it entirely to me.' So I did. But I always found that in all these cases nothing was really done. No man has disappointed me so completely as Runciman." Lord Kitchener spoke with an unaccustomed note of sadness. I never saw him after that conversation.

As to Lord Grey, he was quite futile in any enterprise that demanded decision and energy, and the tremendous responsibility of action in war had a paralytic effect on his powers. I cannot think of any suggestion of his that contributed in the least to the effective prosecution of the War.

Charles Masterman, whose work on Propaganda had been highly successful, had failed in his efforts to secure a seat in Parliament after his defeat at Bethnal Green, and he had therefore left the Asquith Government. In any case, he unfortunately adopted a very hostile attitude towards my Administration and therefore I could not have availed myself of his services.

In order to test the attitude of my old colleagues towards the Government, I determined to make an



offer of Office to one of them, who had not displayed any active antagonism to me personally. I therefore invited Sir Herbert Samuel to join the Government. He had taken no part in any of the intrigues that went on. He has always done his own snaring. He was

*Invitation to  
Sir Herbert  
Samuel*

a competent and industrious administrator, and I was persuaded that he could preside with neat efficiency over one of the Offices which owing to the War did not demand exceptional gifts of an original kind. Before the War he had won the reputation of being capable and useful in every official sphere he had occupied. During the War he had done nothing in particular, but he had done it very well. When the crash came in 1914 he was quite anxious to do his bit in the Great War and hit on the idea of organising an immediate provision for the unemployed which his discernment of events foresaw as the urgent home problem we had to think of for the duration of the War. When it was discovered that there were no workless labourers to profit by his benevolent forethought, but that on the contrary there was a labour shortage, his contribution to victory came to an end. He gradually sank out of sight altogether as a man who attended to odd jobs of a minor but serviceable character. I have no recollection of his ever having been called in by Mr. Asquith to any of our consultations on major problems arising out of the War.

I asked Samuel to come and see me at the War Office, and as far as I recollect, offered him the post he had occupied in the preceding Administration. He replied that he did not see any elements of endurance in my Government and therefore must decline. I told him that I thought he was mistaken in his estimate of the vitality of the Government, and that

he must not be surprised if that Government were in existence five years from that day. His only reply was an incredulous chuckle. Thus our interview ended. My next meeting with him was at San Remo, four years later, when he came to be offered the Governorship of Jerusalem on my recommendation.

Twelve Liberals who held Office, all minor posts, in the first Coalition, accepted Office in the second.

*Party representation in the new Ministry* Dr. Addison, who had been very helpful as Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Munitions, was made a Minister. He was a man for whose mental equipment I had a great regard. He possessed both breadth and originality of mind.

As to Labour, positions were offered to and accepted by eight members of that Party, as against three in the late Government.

All the Conservative Ministers in the late Administration occupied positions in the new Government, with the exception of Lord Lansdowne. He had for some time been more in sympathy with a peace than with a war offensive, and when the late Government decided that the time had not arrived for negotiation, he felt that his presence inside a Government constituted to prosecute the War with greater vigour was out of place. Moreover, his health was failing and he decided not to come in. On the other hand there were at least four notable Conservatives who were not in the last Administration, but who accepted the invitation to join my Government. One was Lord Milner. I had been one of his most vigorous critics during the Boer War, but that did not prevent his placing his services at the disposal of the State in a national emergency, although his old assailant was at the head of the Government.

Sir Edward Carson also decided to come into the Government once more. It was my original intention to make him a Member of the War Cabinet. He had no administrative experience and I thought that his great talents could be better utilised in a consultative than in an executive position. Conservative Ministers, however, resented his promotion to the Cabinet that directed the War, and I had reluctantly to give way. It was a mistake. He had no aptitude for administrative office, but his keen mind would have been helpful in Council.

The refusal of Liberal Ministers to join the Government enabled me to make an experiment which turned out to be a conspicuous success. I invited from outside a number of men of exceptional capacity who had never held any office in any Government and most of whom were not even in Parliament, to occupy positions of great responsibility. I also decided to place men of this type in charge of some of the new Departments. Shipping was such a vital service for the conduct and continuance of the War that I felt there ought to be a separate Department dealing with it, and that some person experienced in ship management should be put in charge. The very life of the nation depended upon making the best use of our ships—in the transport of food and material from overseas and in the carriage of munitions and men for the various war areas. Had there been a serious breakdown in British shipping the Allies would have been beaten. Our shipping resources were developing a grave deficiency. I therefore decided that a new Ministry should be created whose exclusive function should be their complete re-organisation. I invited a great Glasgow shipowner—

*Appointment  
of business  
men*

Sir Joseph Maclay (now Lord Maclay)—to take the post of Shipping Director. How he discharged the important functions of his office it will be a part of my story to tell and I shall tell it with pride in his great achievement.

A new Department was also created for the purpose of controlling the food supplies of the country. I placed Lord Devonport in charge of it. I had some previous experience of him when I was President of the Board of Trade, and he was Parliamentary Secretary to the Board. I knew all about his clear-headedness and his businesslike and masterful handling of every problem I left to his charge. As far as food distribution was concerned, there was no man in the country who had a wider experience.

Mr. Prothero (now Lord Ernle) was brought in as Minister of Agriculture. Not only was he a man of great ability and culture, but he had acquired a thorough acquaintance with agricultural problems as agent of one of the largest and best managed estates in the country. It is also interesting to recall the fact that this was the first experience in office of a man destined at no remote future to play a notable part in the political life of the country—Mr. Stanley Baldwin. He became one of the Junior Lords of the Treasury, with Mr. James Parker and Mr. Towyn Jones. Up to that time he had been Mr. Bonar Law's Parliamentary Private Secretary.

A new Department was created for the purpose of organising the whole of the man-power of the nation on more systematic and efficacious lines. Up to that time, mobilisation had been rather haphazard and there was a shocking waste of effort and energy in this direction. The result was that there was a

shortage in the forces in the field, whilst essential industries suffered from a faulty distribution of the available labour reserves at home. It was decided to form a new Ministry and Mr. Neville Chamberlain was invited to become Director of National Service. He accepted the post. At the time of the appointment I had never seen him and knew very little of him. It was not one of my successful selections.

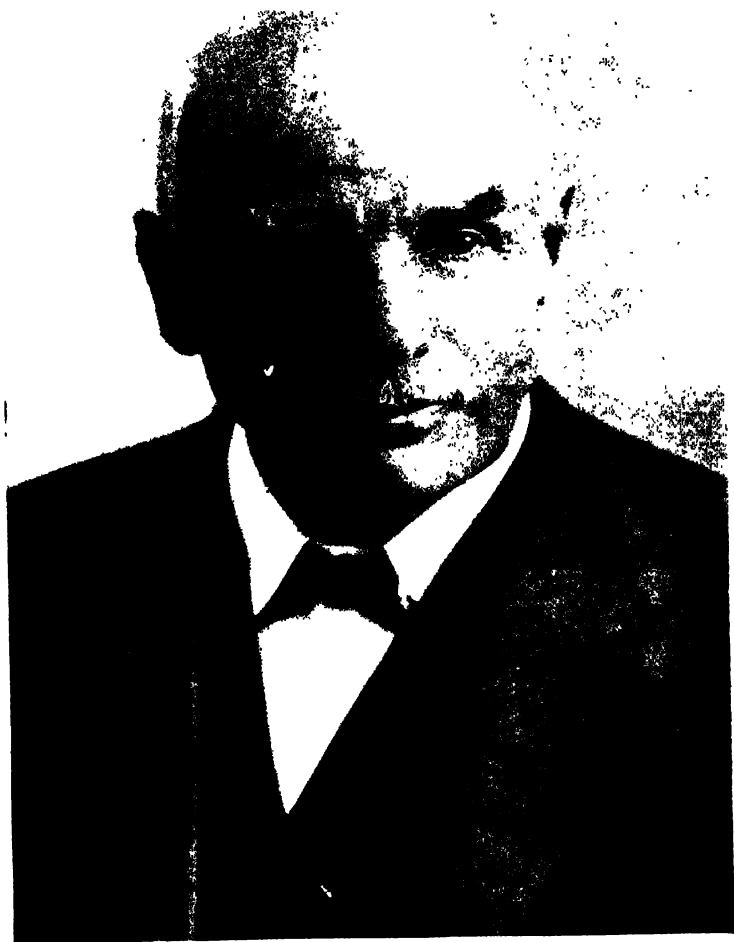
I resolved to create two other new Ministries. One was for the administration of Pensions. For that I designated Mr. George Barnes, one of the most level-headed and highly respected of the Trade Union Leaders. Another was the Ministry of Labour. I invited Mr. John Hodge to become the first Minister. He had been a conspicuously successful Trade Union leader, one who had succeeded in achieving the maximum of benefit for his men with the minimum of strife in the industry. Lord Cowdray, the famous contractor, accepted the chairmanship of the Air Board. Lord Rhondda took office for the first time as President of the Local Government Board in succession to Mr. Walter Long, who became Colonial Secretary.

I was fortunate enough to persuade Mr. H. A. L. Fisher, the Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield University, to undertake the Board of Education. His tenure of that important Office will ever constitute one of the most outstanding chapters in the annals of our educational history. No Minister since W. E. Forster has left such a mark on our system of education. Sir Albert Stanley (now Lord Ashfield), one of the greatest transport organisers of his time, was appointed

to the Board of Trade. How he straightened out the tangle which congested the traffic on our railways will be told in due course.

Another departure from Cabinet traditions which I had decided to initiate was the setting up of a Cabinet Secretariat. Hitherto no written record was ever made of even the most important decisions of the Cabinet, let alone the discussions which preceded them. I have no recollection of Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman or Mr. Asquith ever making a note of the conclusions arrived at, except in very exceptional cases where the decision taken was embodied in the form of an answer to be given to a question about to be put in the House of Commons. The result was that now and again there was a good deal of doubt as to what the Cabinet had actually determined on some particular issue. I came to the conclusion that it was desirable to have a secretary present who would make a short précis of the discussions on all important issues and take a full record of all decisions. Where these decisions affected one of the Departments, a copy of the Minute was immediately sent to the Minister concerned. I thought it was of primary importance that a written intimation of the character and terms of the decision of the Cabinet should be sent formally to the Department, not merely as a reminder to the Minister, but in order that the officials who advised him and carried out his orders should be fully informed. I also thought it not only desirable but imperative, having regard to the number of decisions taken in the past which had not been carried out, to charge the Secretary with the duty of keeping in touch with further developments and of reporting to me from time to time what action

*A Cabinet  
Secretariat  
instituted*



*(Photo: Hay Wrightson.)*

**Rt. Hon. George Nicoll Barnes.**





had been taken in the various Departments concerned on these Cabinet orders. I subsequently found that these enquiries addressed from the Cabinet Office and the reports which had to be made in response, were very helpful in keeping the Departments alert and well up to the mark. Where the Secretary reported failure or delay in carrying out decisions, I sent for the Minister, and where unexpected difficulties had arisen, steps were taken to remove them.

The first Secretary appointed to this responsible and confidential position was Sir Maurice Hankey.

*Sir Maurice Hankey's appointment* He discharged his very delicate and difficult function with such care, tact, and fairness that I cannot recall any dispute ever arising as to the accuracy of his Minutes or his reports on the action taken.

I strengthened my own secretariat by adding to my personal staff, Mr. Philip Kerr (now Lord Lothian) and Professor Adams. They were both men of exceptional capacity. Mr. Kerr gave me the assistance of a fine mind in all the work arising out of Imperial and Inter-Allied Conferences. Professor Adams helped over domestic issues like Food Production and Ireland. I found his knowledge and sagacity of great service.

*Swift formation of new Ministry* I lost no time in forming the Ministry. We were at war and every hour counted. There were many vital questions overdue for decision. I remembered the leisurely and even dawdling way in which the first Coalition had been pieced together and the precious days wasted in discussion over appointments to Ministerial posts, whilst important decisions, more particularly over the Dardanelles attacks, had to

await the weighing and balancing of personal "claims" rather than merits. This method of doing business during a war was responsible for one of the many delays which proved to be fatal to that particular enterprise.

I was called to the Premiership on the 7th December, and on the 9th the War Cabinet had been constituted and actually met to transact business.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII (*continued*)

### FIRST TASKS AS PRIME MINISTER

#### 3. SURVEY OF THE POSITION

In order to understand the nature and gravity of the undertaking with which the new Government was confronted, it is necessary to make a rapid survey of the position at the end of 1916.

We were on the eve of the fourth campaign of the War. The conditions under which it was to be fought had already been settled by military and naval strategy and by events and circumstances, some of the most fateful of which, as I have already related, I had vainly endeavoured to modify or change. It was my misfortune to be called upon to grapple with the consequences of policies which I had resisted step by step.

*The harvest  
of wrong  
policies*

Three of the Allied Powers, Belgium, Serbia and Roumania, had been almost completely destroyed as military entities that counted in the struggle. Russia, still huge, was sprawling on the ground, with formidable possibilities if she rose with the remnant of her great strength to face the foe. But no one knew whether she could or would rise. She excited more conjecture than confidence. The overwhelming preponderance in man-power which had given the Allies such a false sense of security and lured them in 1915 and 1916 into enterprises where human life

was thrown lavishly and recklessly into the conflagration to feed the flames as if there were an endless store of available men in reserve, had now practically disappeared. From the purely military aspect the Central Powers seemed stronger and more unbreakable than they had ever been.

Most, if not all, opportunities for manœuvring the Central Powers out of their vast stronghold had been closed down one by one. Its weak points

*Strategical  
opportunities  
lost*

had been sought out in order to avoid them as if they were traps for the faint-hearted. The High Commands and the Chiefs of Staffs of the Western Powers had concluded that this was to be a war of attrition, and they had so contrived matters that their strategical notion should be the only one left on the board. It was a pre-planned "I told you so." With these themes I deal later on in my chapter on the military situation. Here I call attention to the fact that the struggle had already become essentially a trial of endurance

*A struggle  
of endurance*

between nations more than between armies. There were still openings for military skill. Genius can always find or force an opening. The Allies had almost given up looking out for such an instrument of deliverance. The issue of the War now depended on exhaustion. Whose strength would give out first? Morale, food, man-power, war material and transport—the belligerent group that failed first in one of these essential elements would lose the War.

In this devastating struggle the resources of all the warring nations had been wellnigh strained to the utmost limit. The nation that made the most economical and efficient use of its remaining strength, having regard to the strategic and economic position

as defined at the end of the third campaign, stood the best chance of winning in the end. The Central Powers were in the best strategical positions on land, on every flank. As they were both in the East and West entrenched on Allied soil, they could not be dislodged without a decisive preponderance in men and machinery on the side of their assailants. The overthrow of Roumania had shortened their line, whilst it had lengthened the Russian line by 500 kilometres. If Russia went out of action, the resources of the combatant groups in men would be equal.

*Advantages  
held by  
the enemy*

As far as the mechanism of war was concerned, the Allies were making strides towards equality. With a sustained effort, 1917 would see the advantage in this respect inuring to their side. On the French Front the Allies were better off than the Germans in ammunition, but not in guns. The French had neglected the advice given by their ablest artillery officers to them as well as to us to concentrate on heavy artillery, especially howitzers of the latest patterns. We accepted this excellent counsel and acted upon it. The French gunner staffs disliked it, and accordingly delayed action. They regarded this advice as a reflection upon their idol, the *soixante-quinze*—an unpatriotic aspersion on this product of French genius. Later on in the year they realised what Verdun ought to have taught them earlier, that in the matter of heavy guns they were inferior to the Germans, and that this inferiority crippled their offensive power.

The Turkish equipment was not comparable to ours. But so far we had made a wretched use of our superiority in men and material in that area. The Staff seemed to discourage victories in the East,

regarding them as an exaltation of strategical heresy, and therefore an abomination. On all other fronts the

*Expert antipathy to Turkish campaigns* Central Powers were better equipped, having regard to the task in front of them, than the Allied forces. The last remnant of the Roumanian Army was

being battered into impotence by a more powerful artillery than their own. The Russians were inferior in every mechanical arm and their transport was deplorable. The army of entrenched Germans, Austrians, Bulgarians, and Turks, looking down from the Balkan heights on their foes in the Macedonian plain, were infinitely better equipped for their purely defensive role than were the Allied Expeditionary Army for the offensive they must sooner or later

*Deadlock on Salonika and Italian Fronts* undertake, if victory were ever to be achieved in that battle area. On the Italian Front, Cadorna's artillery was inadequate to the part entrusted to it of shattering defences blasted out of Alpine rocks. The Allies had therefore still a good deal to do before they attained the necessary mechanical advantage over the Central Powers.

The imminent collapse of both Roumania and Russia would give definite advantage to the Central Powers in man-power. To attain an appreciable superiority in equipment, and thus to fill up the deficiency in man-power which would be created by the gaps already yawning in the East, would demand intensified activity on the part of the Allies. The brunt of this burden must fall on the two greatest engineering countries in the Alliance—Britain and France, with such help as we could afford to purchase in America.

An additional reason for increasing the Allied

output of munitions in their own factories and workshops, was the growing difficulty experienced in financing Allied orders abroad. *Economy in use of man-power essential* The supply of this increasing demand meant a further drain on a diminishing reserve of man-power, at a time when the armies were short of men to fill up their depleted battalions. A survey of our available resources for all these purposes, at and behind the front, left no doubt that the best use was not being made of our manhood, and that a thorough national reorganisation was required if we ever hoped to pull through the years ahead of us with success.

But beyond everything it was becoming a contest of national morale. All the nations involved in this colossal struggle were supremely courageous races with a long military tradition behind them. *Importance of the Home Front* All their tribes were fighting tribes. Not one of them would give in readily ; certainly not as long as their armies presented an unbroken front to the foe. Even a series of shattering military defeats had failed so far to induce Russia, Belgium, Roumania or Serbia to capitulate. A breakdown on one side or the other of the rival nations would come from some cause which would wear out the spirit of their people. Hunger alone could effect such a collapse. Much would depend on the quality and efficacy of the appeals, written and spoken, that would be made in order to stimulate and sustain the courage and constancy of the armies and the people behind them. But the history of sieges demonstrates that it is only a small number of indomitable men and women who can long endure the daily spectacle of privation amongst those whose natural protectors they are. In

considering our problems, the question of food supplies therefore took a foremost place in the rank.

The first half of the War demonstrated clearly how vital were transport on sea and land and the supply of munitions to a successful prosecution of the War. The second half of the War brought home to all the belligerents the fact which ought to have been obvious

*Vital part  
played by  
food supplies*

before, that an adequate supply of food, not only for the troops, but for the civilian population, was an essential condition of their continuance in the War. The final event depended more on food than on fighting. The drain on man-power, and the concentration of transport on the provision of war material and the carrying of it to the various fronts, were already having a serious effect on food supplies. When I took over the supreme war direction in

*In Russia*

December, 1916, I found Russia on the point of falling to pieces owing to food shortage. The munition problem there had by no means been solved, but it had considerably improved, and in spite of huge losses there was no lack of fit men to fill up the gaps. But the supply of food for the cities and for certain sectors of the front had broken down completely, and in the grimmest of Russian winters millions of householders, from lack of sustenance and fuel, were shivering many degrees below the freezing line. To these hungry and chilled multitudes and their soldier sons, brothers and husbands, revolution was not only acceptable, but inevitable. It was the only alternative to famine. A sufficiency of food and fuel might have kept Russia in the War right to the end, no longer perhaps a steamroller, but at least a stone wall.

Austria was also suffering more and more severely



from the lack of food. The Hungarian harvest of 1916 had been a calamitous failure ; 1917 did not make up the deficiency. Not only wheat but milk and meat were also becoming scarcer. The shortage contributed to the readiness of Austria to make peace. It was one of the decisive factors in her final surrender. In the field her armies were still unbeaten on foreign soil when the collapse occurred. The turn of Germany was obviously coming. Germany was passing through the terrible "turnip winter."

*In Austria* Her potato crop had failed and the population had to fall back on turnips. The food distributed per head in Germany during this winter had a calorific value of only half the minimum necessary to keep the population in health. We are told that by 1917 the output in the German mines and munition factories was suffering considerably as a result of the decline in the physical fitness of the workers.

It was becoming a war of starvation. In the end meagre and mean feeding at last subdued the spirit that had for four years of sanguinary battles proved indomitable on every battle front. Food in all the belligerent countries was therefore at the end of 1916 becoming a growing, and as it turned out, a paramount element in the chances of victory. They were all beleaguered nations.

So far in Britain, France and Italy, there was no actual privation suffered by any section of the people owing to food shortage. The command of the sea was still in Allied hands and the corn lands of the earth were still open and available to Allied cupboards, not in sufficient quantities to fill them, but just enough to

*Menace of the submarine*

prevent the boards from becoming bare. But the submarine had introduced an element of increasing precariousness to this food supply. Once sea transport failed—and it was failing rapidly—the resistance of the Allied armies would collapse. All nations were becoming rattled and disillusioned by the prolongation of sacrifice and horror with indecisive result. A touch of hunger might convert disillusionment into disaffection. Food was at the very root of national morale, and in a protracted struggle between equally brave nations morale is the decisive factor. That is why, when it became my duty to survey the whole area of the War and the conditions which would determine its final result, I realised that the “feeding of the multitude” was a matter of supreme moment. I had, as a matter of fact, come to that conclusion over a year ago, and quotations I have already given from my interventions and proposals on this question at War Councils in 1915 and 1916, are a proof of my concern that we should take timely steps for the provisionment of the nation.

In a war of this order, sea power was the key to ultimate victory so long as either party could manage just to hold their own on land. If we maintained control of the seas without actually breaking on shore, the Central Powers could in the end be starved into surrender. Before reaching the point of actual starvation, such privations could be inflicted on their population as would destroy their morale. Had our armies been on their soil, the spirit that bids men die rather than give in to the invader of their native land would have sustained them. But no people will die of hunger rather than relinquish conquests of foreign territory. Potential famine was therefore the

*Sea power  
the key  
to victory*

most powerful weapon in the army of the belligerents. As long as Britain kept her rule over the waves, neither she nor her Allies could be beaten by any shortage of food or essential material for waging war. On the other hand, the Central Powers could not win if they were cut off from the resources of the great world outside. It was a ruthless calculation, but war is organised cruelty. Those who think they can restrict its barbarities will find in the end that savagery is of its essence and that civilised warfare only means that men have changed the instruments and methods of torture. The sum total of the agony inflicted on mankind by war was never as great as it proved to be in the World War of 1914-18. Men, women and children all suffered the horrors of war. The deaths behind the fighting lines owing to the effects of underfeeding and bad feeding were more numerous than those of the slain in the stricken field.

When Verdun and the Somme had both failed to achieve a military decision, the belligerents were confronted with a war of starvation.

For us the most serious and urgent element in this situation was that of our dwindling shipping resources. The sea was the jugular vein of Allied vitality. Once that were cut the Allied strength would soon be drained of its life blood. To quote a contemporary report submitted to the War Cabinet in the first days of its deliberations : " The whole cause of the Allies depends upon the maintenance of sea power. The communications of the Armies in the East and West can only be carried out by sea, and nearly every one of the Allies at the present moment depends upon sea-borne supplies not only for the Armies themselves,

*Burdens on  
our shipping*

but for raw material for munitions, and for the essentials of life of the civil population as well."

There was a serious shortage of shipping for the pressing needs of the Allies. Essential drafts for Allied Armies in Salonika, Egypt and Mesopotamia were held up because there was no transport available. Railway material which was urgently required behind the line in France could not be taken across for lack of ships. Ammunition for some of our armies had to be cut down (although ships had to be found to transport forage for the Cavalry Divisions that were always fit and ready to complete the great rout that was for ever impending on the Western Front). Our food supplies could not be replenished for the same reason. The position in all these respects was precarious. Italy was in dire need of coal for her munition works, but the deliveries were 800,000 tons short of her requirements because we had no available ships to carry the fuel. Italy's already inadequate supply of ammunition was thus still further diminished for lack of British shipping. The submarine attack on our shipping had inflicted serious losses during the last few months. The new submarine monster was gliding everywhere through the deep in search of prey—defenceless prey. Allied ships were being stricken down in increasing numbers. We seemed impotent to protect our ships and their devoted mariners.

*Growing  
shortage  
of vessels*

Since the beginning of August, some 675,000 tons of British shipping had been sent to the bottom of the sea. On the other hand, we were making no real effort to build new vessels and the output of our yards had decreased by 66 per cent. The shortage was not altogether due to the lack of tonnage, but was largely attributable to the fact that the use we made

of our available shipping resources was unbusinesslike and consequently very wasteful. The control and distribution of our shipping was exceedingly profitable to certain shipowners, but ruinous to the Allied cause. Whilst we were short of transport for essential war purposes and even for the food of the people, millions of tons were thrown away on superfluous luxuries, carried at ruinous freights. They ought to have been cut out of the national life during a great war. Only half our shipping was under Government control. The rest was left free for the haggling of the market, and in a war-restricted market the haggle became an exaction. One consequence of this was that a very considerable number of our ships were still trading between South American ports, where the freights were extravagantly high because of the scarcity of ships. The ports were also congested and the defective arrangements for loading and discharging cargoes caused considerable delays, thus diminishing still further our transport capacity. The 50 per cent. of our shipping which was under Government control was by no means used to the best advantage, the Admiralty more particularly having far too large a reserve of ships for emergencies which never arose, thus immobilising ships which would have been invaluable if they had been used for urgent war services. The railway system was clogged with non-essential traffic. This got in the way of vital needs, adding to deficiencies and delays. Unless action were immediately taken to improve the transport situation on sea and land, there was a real danger that the maximum effort which was essential to the attainment of victory would never be achieved.

*Failure to  
economise  
tonnage*

The most serious result of the shipping position

was the fact that our food supplies were also in jeopardy. As I have already pointed out, our margin was a very narrow one. Harvests had failed, not merely in this country and on the Continent, but in the Argentine, and the nearest abundant supply was to be found in Australia. That meant long voyages for our dwindling Mercantile Marine. At home, in spite of the appeals made by both Lord Selborne and his successor, Lord Crawford, no steps had been taken by the late Government to increase production. The yield of our soil was steadily diminishing. During the last twelve months the wheat production of this country had fallen off by about one-sixth. Unless some steps were adopted without delay to bring more land into cultivation, and to increase the fertility of that which was capable of cultivation, then there would be a further grave diminution in the quantity of food raised in these islands. That meant either privation or a further inroad on our already overburdened shipping.

As soon as the War Cabinet entered upon its functions, it caused a careful and searching survey to be made of the national position in respect of all these urgent problems. As to many of them, the report presented to us showed that the late Government had decided in principle that some measures should be taken immediately to cope with the difficulty, but in each case the report ended with the words "No Action Taken."

A Government that had surrendered to the Allied military strategy which had decreed a war of attrition had neglected to take the necessary steps to prevent the wearing down process going against us. If it was

too late to alter the military strategy, there was yet time to see that we did not fall in the fight through sheer exhaustion, whilst the foe had still enough strength to stand and wield his sword. Our gravest problem was one of reconstruction and concentration so as to make our resources last out longer than those of our adversaries.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### THE GERMAN AND WILSON PEACE NOTES OF DECEMBER, 1916

IN the account I gave in my last volume of the episode of the Lansdowne Memorandum, I recorded *Asquith's decision against inconclusive peace* the fact that the Asquith Government had come to the unanimous conclusion that it would be a disastrous mistake to enter into peace negotiations with Germany before inflicting a complete defeat upon her armies.

Although Lord Curzon, in a speech delivered in the House of Lords, referred to "the glorious and noble victory of the Somme," the phrase was recognised at the time, especially by those who knew the facts—soldiers and civilians—as a merely characteristic piece of fustian. The Allies had completely failed in the main purpose of their attack, and the Germans had actually withdrawn troops from the battlefield at the crisis and climax of the offensive against them, in order to stage a more triumphant offensive of their own in a region which was removed hundreds of miles from the Somme terrain. At best the battle ended in a stalemate, which meant a check for the Allies as far as their main objective was concerned.

Nothing had therefore happened to alter the situation since the Asquith Cabinet decided in



November not to encourage or countenance peace negotiations.

An opportunity soon arose for giving a practical application to that decision. Early in December, 1916—a few days after I became Prime Minister—the German Government issued its famous Peace Note.

*German  
Peace Note  
issued*

Although summaries had appeared in the Foreign Press for days, the full text of the Note was not communicated to the Allied Governments until the 18th December, when the American Ambassador delivered it, at the request of the German Government, at the Foreign Office. Lord Robert Cecil, who was acting Foreign Secretary in the absence through illness of Mr. Balfour, reported to the War

*Covering  
message from  
America*

Council that the American Ambassador, in transmitting the Note on behalf of the German Government, had indicated that the United States Government would deeply appreciate a confidential intimation in advance of the proposed reply by the British Government to the Note, and that his Government itself intended to make representations on the subject at the appropriate moment, and had for some time had such intention independently of the German Note.

As there has been some hostile comment in censorious circles upon the Allied replies to this German Peace approach, it would be well here to reproduce it in full. These replies have been represented as the spurning by the Allies of a favourable opportunity for making a satisfactory peace. Unless the tone and the terms of the document are read carefully, it is not possible for anyone to come to any just conclusion as to the attitude adopted towards it by the Allied Powers.

“ Berlin,

12th December, 1916.

*Text of  
German  
Peace Note*

Mr. Chargé d’Affaires,

The most formidable war known to history has been ravaging for two and a half years a great part of the world. The catastrophe that the bonds of a common civilisation more than a thousand years old could not stop, strikes mankind in its most precious patrimony ; it threatens to bury under its ruin the moral and physical progress on which Europe prided itself at the dawn of the twentieth century. *In that strife Germany and her Allies, Austria-Hungary and Turkey, have given proof of their indestructible strength in winning considerable successes at war. Their unshakable lines resist ceaseless*

*attacks of their enemies’ arms. The recent diversion in the Balkans was speedily and victoriously thwarted. The latest events have demonstrated that a continuation of the War cannot break their resisting power. The general situation much rather justified (sic) their hope of fresh successes.\**

It was for the defence of their existence and freedom of their national development that the four Allied Powers were constrained to take up arms. The exploits of their armies have brought no change therein. Not for an instant have they swerved from the conviction that the respect of the rights of other nations is not in any degree incompatible with their own rights and legitimate interests. *They do not seek to crush or annihilate their adversaries.\** Conscious of their military and economic strength and ready to carry on to the end if they must the struggle that is forced upon them, but animated at the same time by the desire to stem the flood of blood and

to bring the horrors of war to an end, the four Allied Powers propose to enter even now into peace negotiations. They feel sure that the *No indication of terms* propositions which they would bring forward and which would aim to assure the existence, honour, and free development of their peoples would be such as to serve as a basis for the restoration of a lasting peace.

If, notwithstanding this offer of peace and conciliation the struggle should continue, the four Allied Powers are resolved to carry it on to an end, while solemnly disclaiming any responsibility before mankind and history.

The Imperial Government has the honour to ask through your obliging medium, the Government of the United States to be pleased to transmit the present communication to the Government of the French Republic, to the Royal Government of Great Britain, to the Imperial Government of Japan, to the Royal Government of Roumania, to the Imperial Government of Russia, and to the Royal Government of Serbia.

I take this opportunity to renew to you, Mr. Chargé d'Affaires, the assurance of my high consideration.

VON BETHMANN HOLLWEG.

To Mr. Joseph Clark Grew,  
Chargé d'Affaires of the United  
States of America."

This was not the language of an enemy suing for peace after a crushing defeat in the field, or of a foe

conscious that on the whole the tide was beginning to turn against him, or even of an adversary who realised that although he had no fear of being beaten, nevertheless, if the War continued both parties in the end would be ruined. It was rather in the nature of an overture from a Power conscious of the unbreakable strength of its armies, boasting of a succession of resounding triumphs against its enemies and of its ability to hold its own in future against every effort to dislodge its grip on the vast territories it had conquered, but anxious to cast upon its enemies the responsibility for prolonging the War. German statesmanship, which was entirely under military control and direction, had three objects in view when it launched this peace offensive. The first was to reconcile that part of the German population who were beginning to feel that brilliant victories without number brought nothing but heavier burdens, more and more privations, and mounting casualties to the triumphant Fatherland. It was necessary to convince these that ultimate victory was the only alternative to an unsatisfying peace. The second was to persuade neutral countries which were becoming increasingly hostile to Germany and also the people behind the Governments of belligerent countries, that the prolongation of the War was due entirely to the bloodthirsty stubbornness and insatiable ambition of Allied Governments. The third was to enter into peace negotiations whilst military conditions were more favourable to Germany than to the Allies, the German Armies being quartered in Allied territory and on the whole having beaten off the assaults made on their positions there on every front.

*Language of  
a conqueror*

*Objects of the  
German Note*

With a view to enabling the Cabinet to inform itself fully of the position before discussing the character of the reply, the Secretary of the War Cabinet was instructed to circulate to its Members the papers prepared during the discussions of the late Government in connection with possible terms of Peace, conditions of an Armistice, and negotiations at the end of the War. Steps were also taken to ascertain the views of both Allies and Neutrals on the subject of the Note itself. It is interesting now to peruse the reports which came in. They indicate the reaction in each country, and the views and opinions formed at the time by belligerents and neutrals, as to the purport and bona fides of the German communication.

The French attitude was definitely suspicious of the Note. It was expressed by M. Briand in a speech in the Chamber on 13th December, 1916. He declared that it was his bounden duty to put France on her guard against a peace which was really an attempt to split up the Allies. Surveying the situation he showed that, despite German successes in the past year, France, which had supported almost alone the terrible weight of the attack in 1914, had more reasons than ever for confidence in her conviction of the certitude of victory. Germany, in throwing out peace proposals, proclaimed at the same time her victory; and in truth Serbia, Belgium and Roumania were at present invaded and the crime not yet expiated. Germany might declare that she did not want war. But she was the aggressor, and France, victorious at Verdun, would not walk into the trap of these peace proposals.

M. Jules Cambon thought the Allies should traverse

the German assertions, and say that a peace offer without terms was not genuine. In his opinion it would be better for France to take the lead in answering, and a conference to settle the reply would be unnecessary and inadvisable.

In view of what happened later, the attitude of Russia towards the German peace overtures has an interest of its own. The Russian answer *Reply of Russian Duma* was inspired by the Duma and not by the Czar alone. The Russian Duma decided in favour of making peace "only after victory." M. Pokrovsky, the Foreign Minister, pointed out that there was nothing in the German Note to suggest that the peace the Central Powers were prepared to make would be satisfactory. "What are the circumstances in which the German proposal was made? The enemy armies have devastated and occupied Belgium, Serbia, and Montenegro, and a part of France, Russia and Roumania. The Austro-Germans have just proclaimed the illusory independence of a part of Poland, and are by this means trying to lay hands on the entire Polish nation. Who then, with the exception of Germany, could derive any advantage under such conditions by the opening of peace negotiations? . . . To attempt at the last moment to profit by their fleeting territorial conquests before their domestic weakness was revealed—that was the real meaning of the German proposal. In the event of failure they will exploit at home the refusal of the Allies to accept peace in order to rehabilitate the tottering morale of their populations."

"Another motive," M. Pokrovsky continued, "might be a hope of exploiting elements of cowardice amongst the Allies. *But Russia would fight on for a*

*peace of victory.* All her sacrifices would be in vain if a premature peace were concluded with an undefeated Germany."

Communications from the Russian Foreign Office to us confirmed this attitude, while suggesting that we should not flatly refuse to make peace, but insist that peace must be made on our terms. Discussion as to the form of the reply could take place in London or Paris.

Baron Sonnino, the Italian Foreign Minister, was of opinion that the Germans hoped for a direct refusal, and suggested that the German  
*Views of other Allies* claims and assertions should be refuted, and that they should be challenged to declare their terms. The Allies could consent to no annexations by the Central Powers, and Italy would not agree even to the *status quo*.

Belgium favoured a conference to draw up an identical reply. This should not be a flat refusal to make peace, but a refusal to negotiate without knowing the German proposals.

Japan stated that she could not accept the *status quo ante*.

The Neutral countries were all of opinion that it would be a mistake for the Allies to reject outright the German peace offer.

From the United States our Ambassador, Sir C. Spring-Rice, telegraphed, reporting :—

"It is generally felt that Allies should not decline to receive definite terms of  
*Feeling in the U.S.A.* peace from the Germans. The German position in the U.S.A. would be much strengthened by such a refusal." He advised

"giving expression to strong pacific sentiment but declaring that His Majesty's Government must be guided in their action by the character of the Peace terms proposed and must act in consultation with our Allies." He would further add that pending decision we would continue the War with all our resources until an assured peace was established. If President Wilson should himself put forward any suggestions the British Government should show appreciation non-committally of his friendly gesture. The German party in the United States were clearly hoping for a direct refusal on our part.

Sir C. Spring-Rice suggested "that a statement in the U.S.A. might well be made broadly on the lines of Grey's speech of 22nd March, 1915, stressing the importance of reparation for Belgium. The Government of the United States very much wants to end the War as it fears intensification of the submarine campaign and spread of the War to America."

In Switzerland the Foreign Minister thought that complete rejection might exasperate the German population and intensify the ruthlessness of the War.

*Other  
Neutral  
views*

Opinion in Holland was to a similar effect.

The Swedish Foreign Minister viewed the German Note as a manoeuvre, which should be met by a demand to table proposals, rather than by flat refusal.

*At the Vatican, Cardinal Gasparri was of the opinion that the Germans should be asked to state their terms, and if they should prove impossible, the moral advantage would*



*rest with the Allies in continuing the struggle. He said that he had reason to believe that the German terms would be moderate.*

The general tenor of opinion among the Allied and Neutral countries was opposed to any reply which would imply a point-blank refusal to negotiate. But opinion was practically unanimous that Germany should be asked to state her terms. It is significant that the Vatican also took this view, and expressed the belief that the terms would be moderate. The Vatican was suspected of being pro-German. It would probably be nearer the truth to say that the majority of the Cardinals had Austrian sympathies. The Vatican reply would therefore be influenced by representations received from Vienna. But Vienna was not Berlin and their interests and ambitions were not identical.

At its meeting on 18th December, 1916, the British War Cabinet had before it all the foregoing information. It was agreed that it would be best for the Allies to concert an identical Note in reply to the German Note, and that this should be signed by them all in Paris, and handed by the representative of France to the American Ambassador. The Note should refute the statements made in the preamble of the German Note, and state that a general offer of peace, without defining terms, was useless. Decision as to its other contents was left over, pending the consideration of a draft reply which M. Briand was reported to be preparing.

As an indication of the attitude of the British Government at that period, I quote two passages bearing on the German Note from the first speech which I delivered in the House of Commons on

*Decision to  
send agreed  
Allied reply*

19th December, 1916, after a Cabinet discussion of its tenor :—

“ Any man or set of men who wantonly, or without sufficient cause, prolonged a terrible conflict like this would have on their soul a crime that oceans could not cleanse. On the other hand, it is equally true that any man or set of men who out of a sense of weariness or despair abandoned the struggle without achieving the high purpose for which we had entered into it being nearly fulfilled would have been guilty of the costliest act of poltroonery ever perpetrated by any statesman. I should like to quote the very well-known words of Abraham Lincoln under similar conditions :—

*My definition  
of British  
attitude*

‘ We accepted this war for an object, and a worthy object, and the war will end when that object is attained. Under God I hope it will never end until that time.’

Are we likely to achieve that object by accepting the invitation of the German Chancellor? That is the only question we have to put to ourselves. There has been some talk about proposals of peace. What are the proposals? There are none. To enter at the invitation of Germany, proclaiming herself victorious, without any knowledge of the proposals she proposes to make, into a conference, is to put our heads into a noose with the rope end in the hands of Germany.

. . . The mere word that led Belgium to her destruction will not satisfy Europe any more. We all believed it. We all trusted it. It gave way at the first pressure of temptation, and Europe has



President Wilson.



been plunged into this vortex of blood. We will, therefore, wait until we hear what terms and guarantees the German Government offer other than those, better than those, surer than those, which she so lightly broke, and meanwhile we shall put our trust in an unbroken Army rather than a broken faith. . . .”

The following quotation from Mr. Asquith’s reply will demonstrate the unity of the nation on this German move :—

“Peace we all desire. Peace can only come—peace, I mean, that is worth the name and that satisfies the definition of the *Mr. Asquith’s* word—peace will only come on terms *corroboration* that atonement is made for past wrongs, that the weak and downtrodden are restored, that the faith of treaties is observed, and that the sovereignty of public law is securely enthroned over the nations of the world.”

No protest was entered from any quarter of the House against the character of our reply. The Pacifist group, led by Mr. Ramsay MacDonald and Mr. Snowden, uttered no word of criticism.

On the following day, the 20th December, the United States Ambassador communicated to the Allied Governments President Wilson’s own Peace Note.

This document began, after protestation of its friendly spirit and purpose, with a disclaimer of any association with the peace overtures of the Central Powers. The President then went on to suggest that each of the belligerents should table their views as to

*President  
Wilson’s  
Peace Note*

the terms on which the War could be concluded, and its recurrence prevented. He said that according to their published declarations, all the belligerent powers had the same object. "Each side desires to make the rights and privileges of weak peoples '*Belligerents*' and small States as secure against *aims similar*" aggression or denial in the future as the rights and privileges of the great and powerful States now at war. Each wishes itself to be made secure in the future, along with all other nations and peoples, against the recurrence of wars like this, and against aggression or selfish interference of any kind. . . ." To attain these and similar ends, a satisfactory peace must first of all be concluded. The United States was also vitally interested in an early peace settlement, and the President therefore urged an exchange of views on peace terms, *which had not as yet been publicly stated.*

In conclusion, President Wilson stated that he was not himself proposing peace terms, or offering to mediate, but merely proposing the taking of soundings, to find out how near we might be to attaining peace.

This document was considered by the War Cabinet on the 21st December. It was published in the Press on the following day. On 23rd December it was again considered and arrangements made for drafts of suggested replies to be prepared by Lord Robert Cecil and Mr. Balfour. There was also before the Cabinet a draft reply prepared by M. Briand to the American Note. But this was set aside as too vague and too evasive. We were of opinion that the Allied reply should be explicit and candid. There must be no doubt left in the minds of belligerents or neutrals as to

*Our decision  
to reply fully  
and candidly*

the objectives for the attainment of which the Allied countries were prepared to make further sacrifices if necessary.

It so happened that an Anglo-French Conference was due to be held three days later in London, to discuss a number of matters connected with the War, including the situation in Greece and Salonika, and the problem of unity of command in the West. Advantage was taken of this occasion to discuss with the representatives of France the replies to the German and American Peace Notes.

The conference took place on the 26th, 27th and 28th December, 1916. MM. Ribot, Thomas, and Berthelot had come over from France to confer with us. M. Briand was unable, through indisposition, to be present. M. Berthelot stated the personal view of the French Premier.

*Inter-Allied  
conference on  
the Notes*

In the discussion on the reply to Germany, doubts were expressed by us as to certain passages in M. Briand's draft. A fresh text was submitted by M. Cambon, the French Ambassador, and approved after revision. This ultimately became the note agreed to by all the Allies, with the addition of a further passage specially relating to Belgium.

In its ultimate form, the reply of the Allied Powers to Germany was handed by the French Government to the United States Ambassador in Paris on 30th December, 1916. It was signed on behalf of Russia, France, Great Britain, Japan, Italy, Serbia, Belgium, Montenegro, Portugal and Roumania.

*Allied reply to  
German Note*

It began by rebutting the assertions in the German Note that the Allies were responsible for the War, and that the Central Powers were now victorious, and

it went on to declare the devotion of the Allies to peace. But, it added :—

“ A mere suggestion, without statement of terms, that negotiations should be opened, is not an offer of peace. The putting forward by the Imperial Government of a sham proposal, lacking all substance and precision, would appear to be less an offer of peace than a war manœuvre.”

*“ A sham  
proposal ”*

After recapitulating the steps by which the Central Powers had forced on the War, and pointing out that the War map of Europe alone gave no true picture of the strong military position of the Allies, the Note pointed out that penalties, reparations, and guarantees were required from Germany. The German Note was declared to be only a device to stiffen public opinion among the Central Powers, mislead the Neutral Countries and justify in advance fresh crimes of submarine warfare, deportations and forced enlistment of alien peoples. The Note proceeded :—

“ Fully conscious of the gravity of this moment, but equally conscious of its requirements, the Allied Governments, closely united to one another and in perfect sympathy with their peoples, refuse to consider a proposal which is empty and insincere.”

*Refusal to  
entertain it*

No peace was possible until reparation could be secured for the violation of national rights, and a settlement achieved which would prevent a repetition of such outrages.



In conclusion, the Note dealt with the case of Belgium, and Germany's violation of its neutrality and cruel treatment of its people. Peace terms must assure that country legitimate reparation, guarantees, and safeguards for the future.

*Special case  
of Belgium*

This was the reply to the German Note. The Anglo-French Conference then proceeded to discuss the nature of the reply to be made to the United States President.

*Reply to  
Wilson  
discussed*

The opinion was against separate notes. On this, the French were emphatic. As to the contents of a joint Note, Lord Robert Cecil reported that Mr. Page, the American Ambassador, had told him that morning that the majority of people in America were in reality friendly to the Allies, but that we had not been able to get the spirit in which we were fighting across the Atlantic. Mr. Page urged us to treat the United States Government in the most open way possible.

Mr. Balfour thought we ought to say that if the War were to end without the restoration of Alsace-Lorraine to France, without the union of unredeemed Italy with the Italian Kingdom, without the inclusion of the Serbian people within Serbian boundaries and of the Roumanian population within Roumanian boundaries, without something being done to satisfy Polish aspirations and to free Christian populations from Turkish tyranny, the New Year would begin under unfavourable auspices. He would like to add, as coming especially from Great Britain, that in these results the Government and people of the British Empire had no more direct and immediate interest than had the United States. They would obtain

*Need for  
revising  
European  
national  
frontiers*

from them neither territory nor revenue ; neither military strength nor commercial opportunity. But failure in these matters would imperil the prospects of those great ideas of international relationship to which the President had given so noble an expression.

The joint reply, communicated to the American Government on 10th January, 1917, declared, after expressing respect for the lofty sentiments inspiring the American Note, that the War could be ended satisfactorily only on terms promising a just and durable peace.

*Nature of  
joint reply*

The suggestion in the American Note that the aims of belligerents on both sides were the same was refuted by the undeniable history of the struggle, and the violation of the rights of small nations in its course by the Central Powers. Reference was made to Belgium and Luxemburg, Serbia, Armenia, Syria, Zeppelin raids, submarine atrocities, Miss Cavell and Captain Fryatt, and other items in the catalogue of German crimes.

In reply to President Wilson's request that the Governments should formulate their peace terms, the Note enumerated the following items as matters which must be dealt with in any settlement :—

The restoration of Belgium, of Serbia, and of Montenegro, with the compensation due to them ;

*Necessary  
conditions  
of peace*

The evacuation of the invaded territories of France, Russia, and Roumania, with fitting reparation ;

The reorganisation of Europe, guaranteed by a stable settlement, based alike upon the principle of nationalities, on the right which all people, whether small or great, have to the enjoyment

of full security and free economic development, and also upon territorial and international agreements so framed as to guarantee land and sea frontiers against unjust attacks ;

The restitution of provinces or territories formerly torn from the Allies by force or contrary to the wishes of their inhabitants ;

The liberation of Italians, Slavs, Roumanians, Czechs, and Slovaks from foreign domination ;

The liberation of the peoples who now lie beneath the murderous tyranny of the Turks, and the expulsion from Europe of the Ottoman Empire, which has proved itself so radically alien to Western civilisation ;

The implementing of the Czar's recent proclamation as to the restoration of Poland ;

The rescue of Europe from the brutal encroachments of Prussian militarism.

Belgium, in addition to signing this Note, sent a further reply of her own, drawing attention to the treatment she had received from the Germans, and protesting that she could accept no peace which did not repair these damages and give security for the future.

In conjunction with the dispatch of the Allies' reply, a Note was sent by Mr. Balfour, the Foreign Secretary, to be communicated by the British *Mr. Balfour's* Ambassador at Washington to the United *covering letter* States Government. This dispatch consisted of an explanation and commentary upon the Allies' Note.

Mr. Balfour emphasised the point that any peace settlement must be of a nature to cure the evil conditions which had precipitated the War. That involved a revision of the map of Europe, the expulsion

of the barbaric Turkish Government, and the abolition of the German military machine. If a peace were signed which left German military power unimpaired in the midst of a weakened and exhausted Europe, it would be even less secure than the peace existing before the War.

International treaties were in themselves no remedy, as the fate of Belgium had shown. A powerful nation could stand aloof from or tear up such treaties. If action of that kind were crowned with success in this War, it would be hopeless to try and banish it afterwards by new international treaties.

“Though, therefore, the people of this country share to the full the desire of the President for peace, they do not believe that peace can be durable if it be not based on the success of the Allied cause. For a durable peace can hardly be expected unless three conditions are fulfilled.

*Victory  
essential to  
lasting peace*

The first is that the existing causes of international unrest should be, as far as possible, removed or weakened.

The second is that the aggressive aims and the unscrupulous methods of the Central Powers should fall into disrepute among their own peoples.

The third is that behind international law and behind all the treaty arrangements for preventing or limiting hostilities some form of international sanction should be devised which would give pause to the hardiest aggressor.”

Mr. Balfour suggested that this policy was in harmony with the President's declared ideas, and

said that we were prepared to go on making unparalleled sacrifices of blood and treasure, not to score a barren triumph over another nation, but to make possible the achievement of such a settlement.

Our replies to America and Germany constituted the first occasion on which the Allies had given to the world a complete outline of the terms of settlement they meant to enforce. The whole of the Versailles conditions were sketched out with unmistakable implication : the restoration by the enemy countries of all provinces conquered by force of arms and annexed against the wishes of the inhabitants ; self-determination to be applied to subject races on the basis of nationality ; reparations and indemnities to be claimed from Germany ; steps to be taken which should prevent a repetition of the outrage of 1914 upon international right and peace. Mr. Balfour in a pregnant sentence forecast a League of Nations backed by the irresistible might of international sanction.

All the replies made clear to the world the united resolve of the Allied countries not to make peace until the power of Prussian militarism had been broken.

These documents had an undoubted influence on the course which America took during the next few weeks. They brought her intervention on the side of the Allies appreciably nearer. There is no doubt that the Allied answers to the German and Wilson Note favourably impressed American public opinion, and there was a perceptible change in the atmosphere across the Atlantic from that date.

*A forecast  
of the  
Versailles  
Treaty*

*Effect in  
America*

Apart altogether from the intrinsic merits of the Allied demands, there was a personal element which cannot altogether be excluded. President Wilson was a sincere idealist and he was a man of exalted purpose and convictions, but he was also a man of deep and fierce resentments where his pride was offended or his purpose was crossed. There were indications that he was not too well pleased with the way the Germans had anticipated his peace offensive, and cut in front of him with their Note, after he had given them privately an intimation that he meant to approach Europe on the subject of peace negotiations. He was still more ruffled at their scornful neglect to give a considered answer to his Note. On the other hand, there is no doubt that he was propitiated by the trouble the Allies took to send without delay a careful, deliberate and detailed answer to his appeal, first of all by a detached and separate examination and then by summoning into conference the leaders of the Allied nations, to give to his questions the most specific answer that was possible at this stage of the War. One cannot rule out the effect of this personal deference on a man of his temperament and susceptibilities, when we come to examine the motives which prompted him so soon to abandon the attitude of "too-proud" pacifism upon which he had fought and won his way for a second term to the presidential chair.

The German reply to President Wilson's Note was only given on 31st January, 1917, in a confidential Note written by Ambassador von Bernstorff to Colonel House, a month after the publication of the Allied reply. It was as follows :—

*President  
Wilson's  
reactions*

*Bernstorff's  
letter to House*

“ Washington,

31st January, 1917.

My dear Colonel House,

I have received a telegram from Berlin according to which I am to express to the President the thanks of the Imperial Government for his communication made through you. The Imperial Government has complete confidence in the President and hopes that he will reciprocate such confidence. As proof I am to inform you in confidence that the Imperial Government will be very glad to accept the services kindly offered by the President for the purpose of bringing about a peace conference between the belligerents. My Government, however, is not prepared to publish any peace terms at present, because our enemies have published such terms which aim at the dishonour and destruction of Germany and her Allies. My Government considers that as long as our enemies openly proclaim such terms, it would show weakness which does not exist, on our part, if we publish our terms and we would in so doing only prolong the War. However, to show President Wilson our confidence, my Government through me desires to inform him *personally* of the terms under which we would have been prepared to enter into negotiations, if our enemies had accepted our offer of 12th December.

‘ Restitution of the part of Upper Alsace occupied by the French.

Gaining of a frontier which would  
*German idea of peace terms* protect Germany and Poland economically and strategically against Russia.

Restitution of Colonies in form of an agreement

which would give Germany Colonies adequate to her population and economic interest.

Restitution of those parts of France occupied by Germany under reservation of strategical and economic changes of the frontier and financial compensations.

Restoration of Belgium under special guaranty for the safety of Germany which would have to be decided on by negotiations with Belgium.

Economic and financial mutual compensation on the basis of the exchange of territories conquered and to be restituted at the conclusion of peace.

Compensation for the German business concerns and private persons who suffered by the War. Abandonment of all economic agreements and measures which would form an obstacle to normal commerce and intercourse after the conclusion of peace, and instead of such agreements reasonable treaties of commerce.

The freedom of the seas.'

The peace terms of our Allies run on the same lines.

My Government further agrees, after the War has been terminated, to enter into the proposed second international conference on the basis of the President's message to the Senate.

My Government would have been glad to postpone the submarine blockade, if they had been able to do so. This, however, was quite impossible on account of the preparations, which could not be cancelled. My Government believes that the submarine blockade will terminate the War very quickly. In the meantime my Government

*Submarine  
warfare  
announced*



will do everything possible to safeguard American interests and begs the President to continue his efforts to bring about peace, and my Government will terminate the submarine blockade as soon as it is evident that the efforts of the President will lead to a peace acceptable to Germany. . . .

Yours sincerely,

J. BERNSTORFF.

P.S.—I could not get the translation of the official answer to the President's message ready in time to send it to you. I was in such a hurry to give you the above most important news, namely that the blockade will be terminated if a conference can be brought about on reasonable terms."

This letter, with its intimation that Germany would demand annexations and indemnities from France and Russia, suzerainty over Belgium, and the cession of part of the French and British colonial Empire, accompanied by an announcement of unrestricted submarine warfare, was no peace overture. Italy was ignored except in so far as it was included in the phrase about Austria demanding similar terms to those upon which Germany insisted. It was a challenge to a fight to a finish, and as such the United States had reluctantly to construe it.

## CHAPTER XL

### THE PERIL OF THE SUBMARINES

WHAT must be the sensation of a man who took a leading part in the direction of this tremendous War and undertakes to recall these events with their horrors, their perils and their amazing escapes? It is like that of a traveller who revisits dangerous rapids through which once upon a time he helped to pilot a boat without map, without knowledge, and without experience to guide him or any of the crew as to the course of the river, its depths and its shallows, its sharp and unexpected bends, the strength and whirl of its current, or the location of the hidden rocks in its channel.

The stream that had then to be navigated was necessarily one that had been imperfectly explored. In writing these Memoirs I have been walking steadily along the banks from the first speeding of the waters down past the delirious fury of their torrent.

I am now approaching the narrowest and the most threatening gorge in the mad voyage, with one particularly jagged rock right in the middle of the stream and to all appearances barring the way. In the end it was the German boat that crashed against it and was broken to pieces, but I shudder to think that this experience was almost ours. The submarine campaign proved the ruin of Germany. It

*Gravity of  
danger to  
British  
sea power*

is a horrifying thought that it very nearly achieved the destruction of Britain's sea power, with all that such a disaster would have meant to the fortunes of the Alliance and of humanity.

We are all too apt, on looking back upon Germany's submarine campaign, to regard it as one of her most fatuous blunders. It is true that it turned out to be the fatal error which precipitated her ultimate defeat. But it was a miscalculation only by a margin which might have been on the other side. There were weeks when the German leaders had truthful reports which gave them confident assurance of success, while giving Britain and her Allies cause for an anxiety which at one stage reached the depths of alarm. There were times when some of our most cautious leaders thought we might be beaten and that we would do well to make peace whilst our ships were afloat.

Soon after the Marne it became evident to the more discerning minds in Germany that complete victory was unattainable as long as the *British blockade strangling Germany* command of the sea was vested in Britain, and that it was not impossible that the Central Powers might be blockaded into premature surrender unless the trident could be wrested out of Britain's hands. Rome understood that supreme factor in a war with a maritime power. Napoleon never quite apprehended it. But in Napoleon's days, Continental populations were smaller and all European countries were more self-sustaining, and the standard of necessities was much lower. War itself was more intermittent, the material it demanded for its activities was infinitely less. Neither did it absorb as many men on the battlefield or behind the fighting lines. France

at that time could not therefore be starved into submission. On the other hand, in this War the Germans began to realise they could not go on indefinitely unless the blockade were broken. They were already restricted in some essentials like copper, oil and rubber for the Army, and in some of the necessaries, many of the comforts and most of the luxuries of life for soldiers and civilians.

Now that, owing to the stupidity of their opponents, the weakest flanks in the defence system of the Central Powers in the East and the South-East had been so strengthened as to give Germany confidence that their military situation was established beyond immediate anxiety, both the military and naval authorities turned their thoughts more and more towards the question of blockade. It was a double problem—first that of breaking their own blockade and then that of reversing the situation by becoming the blockaders instead of the blockaded. Had an immediate military decision been within their reach, they need not have worried about the stranglehold of the British Navy. But the failure of the Marne, of

the first battle of Ypres, and lastly and notably the check they had sustained at Verdun, had almost convinced their Headquarters that they could not break through the Allied Front in the West. The equally disastrous and much more sanguinary repulses sustained by the Allied forces in their various efforts to rupture the German lines—defended as they were by only two men for every three assailants—strengthened that conviction. It was therefore becoming more and more a struggle of endurance. Here the naval clutch of Britain gave the Allies a decided advantage. The High Command and the Admirals of Germany,

*War becoming  
a struggle of  
endurance*

therefore, considered separately and together the problem of breaking and if possible of reversing the blockade. Army Headquarters naturally thought first of the possibilities on land. The conquest of Roumania was a definite help. But it did not fill the widening gap between need and supply. It brought the Central Powers oil and corn in great but not sufficient quantities. Russia it is true provided them with unlimited opportunities. Here vast supplies of corn, oil and copper awaited conquest and exploitation. This, however, would take time. The Russian Army had first of all to be cleared out of the way and then some sort of order restored in a revolutionary country. Moreover, Russian transport was very deficient and had to be considerably improved. Something had to be done immediately. The population of Germany was already on diminished and inadequate rations. Whilst German resources were being gradually restricted and German reserves exhausted, the riches and resources of the world were open to the Allies. A blow must therefore be struck at their communications by sea. That was the conclusion to which the German leaders came.

It was some time before the Germans discovered what a formidable weapon they possessed in the submarine. At first, they relied on  
*Possibilities of the submarine*      cruisers and mines and other accepted and established methods of attack on our Mercantile Marine.

I am not sure that the submersible ship was to the Admirals who strode on the quarter deck of mammoth battleships anything more than a fanciful experiment. They never took it very seriously as a real contribution to the struggle for the control of the seas. At best it might perhaps help the ships of the line as an invisible

scout, and maybe, by lucky accident, cripple or with extreme luck sink one or two stray enemy warships. When the last roving German cruiser had been beached in a mangrove swamp in Africa, in order to escape capture, the German Admiralty put more faith in the little swordfish which had already destroyed more enemy ships in a month than the cruisers had succeeded in sinking during the whole of their glorious but short-lived career. When they realised the power of this invention they set about building submarines on a great scale and constructing much larger types.

The old type of submarine with its limited oil capacity could not venture much beyond the Channel and the German Ocean. Its voyage was restricted in time as well as distance. The new cruiser type could drive out into and right across the Atlantic. The first example of this new menace was launched in June, 1916, and it crossed the ocean up to American territorial waters. In leaving, it committed the folly of sinking five vessels outside the Nantucket lighthouse. It was a characteristic sample of Prussian psychology. It was meant to intimidate America into complacency. It roused the spirit of growing antagonism to, and apprehension of Germany which ended in war. Germany was elated over the success of her adventure. Her leaders reckoned that the depredations of the new type of submarine would be so successful that, even if America came into the War, by the time she had raised, trained and equipped an army, there would be no shipping available to carry her troops to Europe. Were they so far out in their reckoning?

There can be no doubt about our alarm at this

new development. When these bigger boats multiplied, they prowled round all the approaches to Britain's shores, from the Bay of Biscay to Iceland, they glided about in every corner of the Mediterranean, and the sinkings, which *Growing successes of German cruiser submarines* were practically all by gunfire, increased at a rate which produced consternation. The Admiralty chart of the waters to the north and the south of Ireland, as well as in the chops of the Channel, became blacker and blacker with the plague spots of submarine activity. The sinkings on the Mediterranean route were also on the increase. Our anti-submarine plans were completely baffled and stultified, for the new submarines were able to operate hundreds of miles into the Atlantic beyond the limits of the areas patrolled by our vessels, and we were short of torpedo boats, even for the Narrow Seas. Our great battleships had to be protected from attack and this necessarily absorbed our best destroyers. In those days I could not help thinking of the efforts some of us made before the War to induce the Admiralty to spend some of the large sums they proposed to allocate to the building of super-Dreadnoughts on the construction of more destroyers. During the last four months of 1916, the gross tonnage of our sunken ships totalled 632,000 tons. The German Admiralty reckoned that unrestricted warfare would soon enable them to sink up to 600,000 tons a month and that four months of such losses would find the Allies suppliants for any tolerable peace.

On 1st February, 1917, stimulated by the success of the new type of submarine, the German Government with its new submarine fleet launched its deadliest blow against this country and the Allies which

depended on our shipping, by adopting the policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. All mercantile shipping proceeding to and from Allied ports was to be sunk on sight without warning. Germany hoped, and not without reason, that four months of such warfare would make inroads upon the vital sea-borne supplies, not only of this country, but of the Allies, on a scale which would force us incontinently to sue for peace.

Was it a wild conjecture at the time? As early as the end of 1915, we were short of sufficient shipping tonnage to transport essential supplies for our forces and those of the Allies and for our own and our Allies' population. During 1916 the position became considerably worse.

As soon as Germany intensified her submarine campaign in the early autumn of 1916 and sinkings began to increase, the prospect became so gloomy that Mr. Runciman, as President of the Board of Trade, warned the Cabinet that at the rate the Allied and Neutral shipping was being swept from the seas, we could not carry on much longer.

At a meeting of the War Committee held on 9th November, 1916, Mr. Runciman told us he had come to the conclusion that "*a complete breakdown in shipping would come before June, 1917.*"

*Mr.  
Runciman's  
warnings*

No sooner had the Committee adjourned than he wrote a memorandum in which he said that he had revised his estimate as to the probable date of the breakdown, and that in his judgment he thought it must come much sooner.

In a further memorandum which he sent to the



War Committee on 22nd November, 1916, Mr. Runciman pointed out that the urgent need of the moment—so urgent that the feeding of Italy, France and the United Kingdom next summer depended upon it—was sufficient tonnage for the carriage of the Indian and Australian crops.

Then he added the very disquieting sentence: "Free tonnage for this purpose is not in sight." They needed 100 vessels per month during November and during each of the succeeding five months. And yet, he informed us, at the end of four weeks' effort, the Transport Department had succeeded in securing less than 30 vessels.

He also added as an explanation for the desperate view he took of things that all his calculations had been drawn "on the assumption that we should not hesitate to kill commerce in order to make ends meet."

He based his estimates on the further assumption that the losses through submarines next year would continue at the rate of the *first eight months* of 1916. If the import of munitions material were increased, and the losses by enemy action depleted our merchant navy in an increasing degree, our plight would become graver.

As a matter of fact our losses for the *last* four months of 1916 were 632,000 tons gross—more by 32,000 tons than the total losses of the first eight months, and the Germans were every week putting more and more of their new cruising submarines into the sea.

As I have already related, in 1916 we were building new ships at the rate of 52,000 tons per month, and losing through submarine action twice and three times as many per month. From the way things were going, the Allied forces could not be equipped

with the overwhelming mechanical superiority which was essential to enable them to smash through fortified positions held by a skilful and brave enemy. Equipment in this country could only barely be kept up, let alone increased, at the expense of adequate food supplies for the Allied population. Italy was suffering severely in the matter of munition supply owing to lack of shipping. The deficiency could not be made up without further imperilling our own food position. It was the failure of the German Government to feed its own people that provoked the discontent which reduced and ultimately broke their morale. The Germans calculated that they could inflict these demoralising privations on the Allies before corresponding hardships had time to disaffect their own civilian population. It was not so rash a calculation when the actual figures of sinkings and resources come to be examined.

Was there anything in the success or efficiency of our naval operations against the new submarine menace up to that date which would justify us in assuming that we could cope with it adequately?

Temporary relief could have been achieved by the withdrawal of all our forces from the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia. The General Staff would have hailed such a movement with joy as a triumphant vindication of their own foresight. Every catastrophe has its compensations for somebody. If the world crashed to its doom according to the Almanac its compiler would have one thrill of satisfaction. But a withdrawal from the Mediterranean, including Egypt, would not have brought much comfort in the end even to the Staffs. We should

thus have been saved tonnage equal to one month's sinkings in the unlimited submarine campaign, but at what a cost! The pressure on the Austrian and Bulgarian resources in the Balkans, which with the collapse of Turkey was the beginning of the end in 1918, would have been withdrawn. Austria would have been free to organise, anticipate and exploit Caporetto. We should have withdrawn altogether from our struggle with the Turk. That would mean that we should have acknowledged to the world and in the very eyes of the East that the Turkish Empire with German help had finally beaten the British. The Suez Canal and ultimately Egypt would have been undefended and must have fallen into Turkish hands. In fact, we should have sustained a more disastrous defeat at the hands of the German submarine than Bonaparte endured when the British Fleet cut off the communications between France and Egypt at the Battle of Aboukir. And the sacrifice would not have saved us in the West if the submarine menace had not been overcome. Even if we had been able to guard and secure the passages of the Channel, that would not suffice if we were unequal to the demand for the protection of the ships that brought us food and raw material for our munitions from distant shores to the ports of Britain, France and Italy. America would have been cut off with her essential supplies and later on with her armies.

By the end of 1916 the British mercantile shipping destroyed by enemy action—mainly by submarines—amounted to 738 vessels, with a gross tonnage of over 2,300,000 tons; nearly one-fifth of the total British tonnage existing at the outbreak of the War. At the end of 1916 we were short (as our

*Shipping  
position at  
end of 1916*

shipping was then handled) of well over 50 per cent. of the tonnage required for imports of what the President of the Board of Trade reckoned to be our irreducible needs. No wonder he thought we could not continue the War much longer. And in spite of these persistent and heavy losses, in spite of their steady and alarming increase, in spite of the fact that the Admiralty knew they might at any time become very much heavier if the Germans resorted to the unlimited warfare which they had threatened as far back as February, 1915, no counter-measures had been prepared which even began to exercise any restraining effect.

Admiral Jellicoe wrote to the Admiralty towards the end of October, 1916—that is, three months before the date of the German warning of unrestricted sinkings, that there appeared to be

*Admiral  
Jellicoe's  
Memorandum*

“a serious danger that our losses in merchant ships, combined with the losses in neutral merchant ships, may, by the early summer of 1917, have such a serious effect upon the import of food and other necessities into the Allied countries as to force us into accepting peace terms which the military position on the Continent would not justify, and which would fall short of our desires.”

And Admiral Beatty declared that the danger was

“jeopardising the fate of the nation and seriously interfering with the successful prosecution of the War.”

The reports from the First Sea Lord and the President of the Board of Trade at each of our

Committees were models of unrelieved dejection. They formed a part of the litany of every War Committee.

How did the Lords of the Admiralty propose to cope with a menace which was gradually strangling the power of the Allies? In another chapter I propose to tell the dismal story of the way the President of the Board of Trade confronted his share of the problem. In a memorandum to the Asquith Government in November, 1916, the Admirals reported :—

*The Admiralty  
view : no  
remedy known*

“ Of all the problems which the Admiralty have to consider, no doubt the most formidable and the most embarrassing is that raised by submarine attack upon merchant vessels. *No conclusive answer has as yet been found to this form of warfare ; perhaps no conclusive answer ever will be found. We must for the present be content with palliation.*”

That is to say, we do not see how the patient's life can be saved, but we can prolong his agony—perhaps ease it a little !

This paralytic document was written over two years after the submarine had begun its devastating activities. The Germans had not yet put a great number of these large submarines in the water, neither had they started their campaign of indiscriminate destruction. When the report was penned by a trembling hand we were losing ships at the rate of 175,000 tons a month. When the numbers of the large type had doubled, and the unrestricted sinkings began, the destruction of tonnage mounted up until it reached the figure of 526,000

tons in a single month for British shipping, and 867,000 tons for British, Allied and Neutral shipping together.

What constituted the difference between the selective methods of the submarine campaign as it was prosecuted before February, 1917, and the indiscriminate attack which ensued after February, 1917? When the submarine had to ascertain, before it let loose its destructive charge, the flag under which ships sailed, it took time to make sure of the nationality of a vessel, especially in thick or rough weather. It also involved hesitation and doubt on the part of the commander, who might get into trouble if by chance he sank an American ship whilst he thought he was aiming his shattering torpedo at a British or a French vessel. A few minutes of hesitation and delay often enabled a ship to escape from its assailant. It also added to the risk of a counter-attack from the guns of the menaced vessel. But when the orders were to sink every vessel that rode the waves under whatever flag it sailed, there was no hesitancy and consequently no time lost. The result was that three ships were sunk for every one that was destroyed before the new decree came into operation.

It was quite clear that unless some means were adopted, either to protect the ships or to destroy their destroyers, or both, there would hardly be enough vessels afloat at the end of the year to provide the Allied populations with sufficient food to keep them alive, let alone providing the Allied Armies with an adequate equipment to smash the entrenchments of the enemy. How long would they be able to furnish the means for maintaining their own defences? If Allied shipping continued steadily to

*Simplicity of  
unrestricted  
warfare*

*The end  
in sight*

disappear at this accelerating rate, the end was not distant. As the Admiralty were in a condition of utter despair at the prospect of either effecting destruction of the submarine or affording protection for our ships, there is nothing surprising in the cry that came from the hearts of men whose caution exceeded their courage: "Let us agree with our adversary quickly."

One of the most lamentable effects of the new submarine campaign was the marked increase in the casualty list amongst our sailors. When a ship was sunk by gunfire the sailors had to take to the boats whatever the weather. Even when the disaster occurred within a few miles of the coast the risks were considerable, but when the ship was sunk in the Bay of Biscay or out in the Atlantic, scores of leagues from any shore, the chances of escape were precarious, and in bad weather few lived to tell the tale. It was one of the new cruelties which this conflict added to the practice of war. The old piratical plank was more humane. The agony was not so prolonged. The German plea in defence of their action was to point to their children starved by our blockade. War is a cruel business.

Was there any justification for the pessimism of British Admirals of high degree? The Official Naval History of the War, in referring to the failure of the Admiralty to hunt down the submarine, states that up to the beginning of 1917, "Our effort, whether considered as attack or defence, had been not only inadequate but wholly ineffective."\* In home waters and the Mediterranean about 3,000 destroyers and auxiliary patrol vessels, trawlers and motor boats had been employed in chasing submarines. From

*Failure of our  
naval anti-  
submarine  
campaign*

\* "Naval Operations," Vol. IV, page 337.

January, 1916, to February, 1917, they had only caught seven. A few others had been struck by mines, and lost or disabled through weather conditions. But the total loss of German submarines during the past 12 months from all causes was only 25, almost entirely of the smaller type. It was known that the Germans had been building more and larger submarines, and that since July they had been putting a succession of submersible cruisers into the seas. It is not too much to say that our Grand Fleet had a lively apprehension of this hidden terror. It would not put out to sea from its boomed and steel-netted shelters without an adequate escort of destroyers, of which, for all purposes, including the time for refitting, it was considered that at least 100 were required: below this number the Commander-in-Chief said he would be incurring an unjustifiable risk in the event of meeting the German High Seas Fleet. No capital ship could leave its base without a patrolling and protecting escort of small craft. If Britannia ruled the waves, she did it with a shaky trident in the days before the submarine was overcome. After the Battle of Jutland, Admiral Jellicoe came to the conclusion that it was not safe for his imposing Armada of enormous Dreadnoughts "to undertake prolonged operations to the South of the Dogger Bank," as the risk of mines and submarines was too formidable. They were not to enter the southern end of the North Sea unless they were forced to do so by direct challenge from the German High Seas Fleet. Meanwhile, the flagship must be interned in safe creeks, the flag had to be carried on the small craft, the nimble destroyers and the weather-beaten trawlers. Here is the "Nelson touch" up-to-date.



That was the atmosphere of crouching nervousness, even before the Germans had launched more than a few of their latest specimens of submarine cruisers.

No attempt was ever made by our powerful Navy to turn its great guns on the submarine nests of Flanders. When I ventured to suggest such an idea it was turned down peremptorily.

*Rate of sinkings :*  
*Outlook in 1917*

In the absence of an effective plan for grappling with this threat to our existence as a sea power, there was every reason for Admiral Jellicoe's gloom. And he certainly had no fresh suggestions for coping with the emergency. Here are official figures supplied to me from the Shipping Department of the Admiralty in July, 1917, showing the prospect in front of us if the convoy system failed and if the destruction of our shipping continued at the same rate as it had proceeded during the first two quarters of the year :—

				<i>Estimated Loss per annum.</i>	
				(1)	(2)
				On basis of losses during first half of 1917.	On basis of losses during second quarter of 1917.
				X2.	X4.
VESSELS SUNK.				Gross Tons.	Gross Tons.
British .. .. .	..	..	..	4,191,000	5,141,000
Foreign .. .. .	..	..	..	2,857,000	3,078,000
Total .. .. .	..	..	..	<u>7,048,000</u>	<u>8,219,000</u>
VESSELS DAMAGED BY TORPEDO OR MINE.					
British .. .. .	..	..	..	915,000	1,055,000
Foreign* .. .. .	..	..	..	624,000	631,000
Total .. .. .	..	..	..	<u>1,539,000</u>	<u>1,686,000</u>
GRAND TOTAL .. ..	..	..	..	<u>8,587,000</u>	<u>9,905,000</u>

\* Foreign vessels damaged are assumed to bear same ratio to Foreign vessels sunk as in case of British vessels, actual figures not being available.

According to the President of the Board of Trade we had a serious shortage in November, 1916. Where should we be in November, 1917, if this havoc continued? These figures will show that the submarine was the crucial problem upon which the issue of the War would depend. If we failed to counter its ravages the Allies were irretrievably beaten. And the new submarine cruisers were being turned out rapidly from the German shipyards and launched without delay on their destructive errand. The West Atlantic, the Bay of Biscay, and the Mediterranean became charged with hidden destruction for our merchant ships. A ship passing through the waters surrounding Britain was in the predicament of a swimmer in a shark-infested sea.

At the meeting of the War Cabinet on 25th May, 1917, the First Sea Lords gave information which had been obtained in connection with *Germany concentrating on submarines* submarines from the Captain of a German submarine, who stated that the whole of the shipbuilding resources of Germany were now concentrated on the building of submarines; that the output would eventually reach 20 a month; that there were approximately 300 German submarines now in commission; that there were no difficulties as regards obtaining crews for these submarines, which were taken from the men of the High Seas Fleet, trained in a special school for two months, and after three weeks' submarine cruise considered competent.

Had we not found some means of dealing with the menace not then visible to the fear-dimmed eyes of our Mall Admirals, who had before the War been thinking of naval warfare in the terms of gigantic Trafalgars between super-Dreadnoughts (with three

to two in our favour), and had we not put into operation ideas which never emanated from their brains and some of which they resisted, others of which they delayed, the German reckoning would have been accurate. Their 600,000 tons per month estimate of losses was exceeded in April, 1917, when 866,610 tons of Allied and Neutral tonnage were sunk.

As soon as the new Administration was formed, the submarine problem was one of the first we took in hand. It was clear to us that the *Attitude of new Government* stunned pessimism of the Admiralty would be justified unless some more effective measures could and would be taken to baffle and quell the submarine. If we failed to achieve this aim, we realised that the War would inevitably be lost to the Allies, and that before long.

We considered several suggestions for coping with the situation, some of which I had already submitted to the War Committee, and which now had the powerful support of the new Shipping Controller :—

(a) The institution of a regular system of convoys for all the merchant shipping from the moment it reached the danger zone ;

*New methods proposed* (b) The construction of new tramp ships on the largest scale attainable consistent with the supply of steel and man-power available ;

(c) The reorganisation of our shipping and ports with a view to making better use of our tonnage ;

(d) The more rapid and effective arming of merchant ships with guns and howitzers ;

(e) Improvement in the methods of hunting down the submarine ;

(f) A stern cutting down of non-essential imports ; and

(g) A considerable increase in home supplies of food, timber and ore—coupled with a reduction in consumption.

The measures taken under (b), (c), (d), (e), (f) and (g) will be related in other chapters. I propose now to deal with the story of the amazing and incomprehensible difficulties encountered in inducing the Admiralty even to try the *Convoy system : opposition of the Admiralty* convoy system. I take this first because it was the expedient which, when it was ultimately adopted, had the most immediate and ultimate effect in reducing the sinkings. It was also the plan which roused the most implacable and prolonged resistance on the part of the Admiralty. It is especially difficult to understand their prejudices in this respect, because after Trafalgar the main function of our ships-of-war was to convoy our merchant vessels through seas infested with French privateers. Convoying was therefore in accordance with the traditions of our Navy in its greatest days.

The first effort made to overcome their blind obstinacy had occurred on 2nd November, 1916, at a War Committee attended by Admiral Sir Henry Jackson, who was then First Sea Lord, and Vice-Admiral Sir H. F. Oliver, then Chief of the War Staff at the Admiralty. Sir John Jellicoe left the Grand Fleet and travelled specially to London at the Prime Minister's request to attend this meeting. The question of submarine attacks by gunfire on merchant ships was considered, and a statement was made as to the increase in the loss to Allied and Neutral merchant ships due to submarine activity. It was

stated that the most serious feature in the situation was that we were not building ships nor obtaining the use of interned or captured enemy ships rapidly enough to make good our losses.

Then a discussion was initiated by Mr. Bonar Law and myself on the question of the possibility of establishing a convoy system. Sir John

*Jellicoe  
disapproves  
of convoys*

Jellicoe's answer was that he did not approve of convoys "as they offered too big a target." In the course of further discussions on the subject, in reply to Mr. Bonar Law, Admiral Sir Henry Oliver said that they convoyed in the Mediterranean, so did the French and the Italians; but that they found it did not do to send more than one ship at a time under escort. The French had tried more, and lost two or three of their ships.

I then suggested a dozen ships being convoyed by three ships-of-war. Sir John Jellicoe said in reply that *they would never be able to keep merchant ships sufficiently together to enable a few destroyers to screen them. It was different with warships, which they could keep in a lock-up formation.* Mr. Runciman added that, *looking at the principle of convoy from the point of view of tonnage, it was most wasteful.* There was no advantage in speed, as a convoy must move at a pace regulated by the slowest ship.\*

Here is the official minute of the decision come to by that War Committee in spite of the protests entered by Mr. Bonar Law and myself :—

"It was pointed out by the naval experts that the measures which had hitherto proved comparatively

\* Henry Newbolt, "Naval Operations," Vol. V, pp. 3 and 4.

successful in the narrow waters in which the enemy submarines had mainly operated were not applicable now that they were able to operate in the open sea at a greater distance from their base.

*War  
Committee's  
decision*

The system of convoys had only been found successful where it was possible to allot a separate escort to each vessel to be protected. The French had attempted to convoy several ships with one destroyer, with the result that ships had been lost. Men-of-war, which were accustomed to cruise in close order, could to a certain extent be protected by destroyer escorts, but merchant vessels straggled too much, and the system of convoys was not applicable to them. *The President of the Board of Trade pointed out that from an economical point of view the system of convoys was extremely unsatisfactory since it involved the whole convoy proceeding at the speed of the slowest ship and the simultaneous arrival of all the ships at the port of destination, which would then become congested. The system of convoys was not therefore generally accepted by the War Committee.*"\*

Although the President of the Board of Trade said that conveying would be uneconomical owing to loss of time, he did not mention the loss of time occasioned by ships being held up because there was submarine activity off the ports. Nor did he mention the loss of time by the ships having to steam considerable extra distances to keep out of the submarine danger zone. Incidentally, this made it very difficult to bunker them at Port Said. In effect, his last argument meant that it were better for a ship to be at the bottom of the sea than arrive late, besides which, the more

\* War Committee, 31st October, 1916.

ships that failed to arrive, the less would be the congestion at the ports.

I seem to have asked Sir John Jellicoe if he had any plans against the German submarines that were now working in the open seas. Sir John said that he had not. They had only armed merchant ships and these could not act offensively because they did not see the submarines. He suggested having floating intelligence centres to direct the routes of the shipping if found needful.

There was <sup>1917</sup> then a long discussion as to the advisability of the defensive arming of merchant ships. Sir John Jellicoe here was of *Arming of merchantmen recommended* opinion that it provided the most effective means of protecting merchant ships against submarines. The conclusion we arrived at on this point was that it was a question of the first importance to increase the production of these guns. The Minister of Munitions undertook to make further enquiries on the subject, and it was arranged that a conference should take place between the experts of the Ministry of Munitions and the Admiralty at an early date.

This "question of first importance" remained a question for the next few weeks ; after which the new Government took it energetically in hand.

The extent to which the submarine was likely to limit the tonnage at the disposal of the Allies was *Plight of Norwegian shipping* illustrated by a Report which was communicated to this Committee during its proceedings. Lord Grey informed the War Committee that he had seen the French Minister at Christiania, who had stated that, according to his most recent information, Norway was likely to yield to Germany and was already

calling in all her ships. We were told that Norway had already lost 13½ per cent. of her total mercantile marine during the present War. The withdrawal of the Norwegian ships from the transport of Allied material would have been a serious blow, but the incident shows clearly the extent to which the fear of the submarine was intimidating even the bravest seafaring nations.

But during the first months of 1917, the Admiralty could not bring itself to change its tactics.

In January, 1917, Admiralty opinion was as emphatic as ever against convoys. An official pamphlet issued on behalf of the Admiralty in that month declared that :—

“ Whenever possible, vessels should sail singly, escorted as considered necessary. The system of several ships sailing together in a *Official view of Admiralty on convoys* convoy is not recommended in any area where submarine attack is a possibility.

It is evident that the larger the number of ships forming the convoy, the greater is the chance of a submarine being enabled to attack successfully, the greater is the difficulty of the escort in preventing such an attack. . . .”

The “ Official History ” states that this pamphlet accurately recorded the collective opinion of the Board of Admiralty, “ for the minutes of those high officials who were more particularly concerned with the defence of trade are all expressive of the same, or nearly the same, view.” The Director of the Trade Division, Sir Richard Webb, was against convoys. The Director of the Operations Division, Sir Thomas Jackson, was inconclusive. Admiral Duff, the



Director of the Anti-Submarine Division, was definitely opposed. Sir John Jellicoe agreed with the latter and so did the rest of the Board of Admiralty.

I have since discovered that while the pamphlet referred to above may have represented the view taken by the Admiral in charge of the British Submarine Service, it was written and issued without taking into account the views of serving officers. There were at the time in the Admiralty, papers from experienced submarine officers explaining why it was difficult for a submarine to attack a convoy.

The Admiralty regarded the escorting of shipping as quite out of the question, and the only strategy it could devise to oppose the submarines was to arrange for four cone-shaped approach routes for shipping to use when coming to this country, the cones pointing respectively to Falmouth, Berehaven, Instrahull (N. Ireland) and Kirkwall, and the stretch of sea inside each cone near this country being patrolled. The method proved a complete fiasco, and indeed a death-trap. The presence of our patrolling craft notified German submarines of the areas where shipping might be expected, and the concentration of vessels in a comparatively small area enabled the U-boats to reap a rich harvest in a short time. In particular, the cone off the south-west coast of Ireland was rapidly becoming the grave of British shipping.

This is the description given to me by the Shipping Controller of the disastrous plan :—

“ Ships would be ordered by the Admiralty to certain points which seemed quite known to the Germans, who had submarines lying in wait, sending down ship after ship.

*Possibly it may help your memory if I remind you about the sugar ships which were brought to one point in the Atlantic and*  
*Shipping Controller's view*      sunk one after the other, until (I think I am right) we had not more than one week's supply of sugar in the country."

There were occasions when a ship reached this zone at a point where a naval ship was expected to be awaiting them in order to indicate the exact route, but there was no guiding warship to be found. These were the "floating intelligence centres" alluded to by Sir John Jellicoe at the War Committee. The "centres" were often floating elsewhere than at the point where they were needed, so the "intelligence" was not available. Sometimes wireless messages were sent by perplexed ships asking for directions. These messages were picked up and decoded by the Germans, so that when the poor merchantmen arrived at the point indicated in the wired orders, they found not a guide, but a pirate awaiting their arrival.

In fact, by this egregious plan our ships were in effect often shepherded into the abattoir where the slaughterers lay in wait for them.

Looking back, it seems amazing that the system of escorting our ships in convoys was not adopted earlier. Yet in the teeth of the fact that other methods were proving futile and disastrous, and our sinkings were increasing at an alarming rate, the Admiralty stubbornly refused to consider adopting the convoy system and thus extending to the mercantile marine the same guardianship as that upon which they relied for their own safety in the Grand Fleet.

Several considerations influenced their judgment.

Some of them I have already stated. But there were others equally fallacious and more fantastic.

*Admiralty's  
low estimate  
of merchant  
skippers'  
seamanship*

The expert advisers of the Admiralty at this time were labouring under a set of surprising delusions. The foremost of these was that the steamers of the mercantile marine could not be relied upon to "keep station." In a convoy they would therefore bump into the escort or each other to the common danger of all, or perhaps in order to avoid this mutual ramming they might disperse, lose sight of each other and of their escort, and in wandering about to recover touch, would become easy victims for the prowling sword-fish of the Germany Navy. The seamanship of the experienced mariners who steered the tramp through all weathers across the wild and foggy seas that surround and lead to these islands was completely under-estimated. No voyager who has witnessed a heavily-laden tramp successfully battling through the breakers in a Bay of Biscay storm would doubt the capacity of the sailors who manned these buffeted and swamped vessels to handle them with complete efficiency, whatever the demand. It surprised me to find that the Captains of the liners who were first consulted by the Admiralty shared Sir John Jellicoe's doubts as to the capacity of the small tramp to keep station. It is simply the arrogant sense of superiority which induces the uniformed chauffeur of a Rolls Royce to look down on the driver of what is contemptuously stigmatised as a "tin Lizzie."

The Admirals were thus sure, in defiance of all historic evidence, that vessels travelling together in a convoy would be exposed to greater peril than if they travelled singly. They greatly over-estimated the number of men-of-war that would be needed

by a convoy. "The opinion which at the time prevailed at the Admiralty," says the Official History,

*An amazing miscalculation* "was that, if merchantmen were placed under convoy, then the escort would have to be twice as numerous as the ships escorted. The Admiralty's advisers did not share the view, which *was not then uncommon*, that a comparatively weak escort would suffice."\* What an amazing miscalculation !

But of all their delusions the most astounding was that which concerned the number of British vessels sailing the high seas and needing escort. This was not some obscure and disputable issue that could be determined only by risky experiment. It was merely a matter of available statistics accurately added up. The blunder on which their policy was based was an arithmetical mix-up which would not have been perpetrated by an ordinary clerk in a shipping office. It nevertheless bewildered the Sea Lords and drove them out of their course for months. Common sense or reference to Lloyd's register and a sum in simple addition would have given them the facts. Up to the middle of 1917 there was no one on the Board of Admiralty who possessed this triple qualification. Here is the fateful error in accountantship which nearly lost us the War, and might have done so had no one pointed it out in time to the Sea Lords.

For some time past the Admiralty had by order of the Government been in the habit of publishing week by week the number of vessels lost by submarine attacks. And in order to make this dismal news sound as hopeful as possible, they had issued with it a return supplied by the Customs Authorities of the number of vessels

*Deceived by  
their own  
figures*

\* "Naval Operations," Vol. IV, p. 183

that had entered and left British ports during the week. To swell this number, every entry and exit was counted, including the numerous goings and comings of coastwise small craft of the smallest dimensions, passing from harbour to harbour on the coast, so that it reached a figure of about 2,500 weekly entrances and as many clearances. Probably these figures did not deceive the German High Command, though they doubtless served to encourage neutrals and depress the enemy populations. Unhappily, they also deceived our own Admirals! A moment's reflection would have told them that nothing approaching 2,500 deep-sea vessels could be concluding voyages to this country every week. As a matter of fact, the actual arrivals and departures of ocean-going ships were between 120 and 140 a week. The Admiralty never examined their grotesque figures. On these calculations they were right in concluding that it would be quite impossible to furnish escorts for convoying the merchant shipping that entered and left our ports, as its volume, according to their fantastic estimate, far exceeded anything the Navy could deal with.

Thus, on the one hand we had a confident Germany launching its deadly offensive against our shipping, and on the other hand we had a palsied and muddle-headed Admiralty declaring that nothing effective could be done to counter it.

On 1st February came the announcement by *Terms of German announcement of unrestricted submarine warfare* Germany of the policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. It was notified to the U.S.A. in a memorandum which stated that :—

“From 1st February, 1917, sea traffic will be

stopped with every available weapon and without further notice in the following blockade zones around Great Britain, France, Italy and the Eastern Mediterranean. . . .”

The zones, as defined in the memorandum, covered all the seas and oceans surrounding the British Isles, France, Belgium, Italy, except a small part of the Mediterranean bordering Spain.

With the effect of this announcement upon America I will deal in another chapter.

During its opening weeks, the new submarine campaign seemed as though it would justify all the hopes of those who had gambled upon it.

*Early successes of the campaign* In the first week of February, 1917, 35 vessels, British and foreign, were sunk in the English Channel and its western approaches. In the course of February and March the number of British merchant vessels lost through enemy action (mainly submarine attacks) was 232, with a gross tonnage of 663,000 tons. In April, our shipping losses for that one month alone were more than 526,000 tons. In addition, upwards of 200,000 tons of Allied and Neutral shipping was being sunk every month.

The effect on the Admiralty was to stun and not to stimulate. But even now they would not listen to the idea of convoying ships.

*Hopelessness at the Admiralty* They were like doctors who, whilst they are unable to arrest the ravages of a disease which is gradually weakening the resistance of a patient despite all their efforts, are suddenly confronted with a new, unexpected and grave complication. They go about with gloomy mien and despondent hearts. Their reports are full

of despair. It is clear that they think the case is now hopeless. All the same, their only advice is to persist in the application of the same treatment. Any other suggestion is vetoed. Their professional honour is involved in not accepting remedies which they have already refused to consider. What makes it difficult to persuade them to try an obvious cure is that it had been urged upon them by civilians and turned down by the experts with scorn and derision. Have you ever heard of doctors who admitted that physic prescribed by unregistered practitioners was more efficacious than their own ; and that they were wrong all the time and the quacks right ? These specialists were at the head of the profession. How could you expect them to own up to those who had called them in and trusted them, that their treatment was inferior to that which herbalists and bonesetters had recommended ? Bearing this professional sensitiveness in mind, we must not criticise too harshly their reluctance to admit their well-nigh fatal error in refusing to apply the convoy system. Their stubbornness grew with every aggravation in the case they were mishandling so crassly and so cruelly.

But what ought the War Cabinet to have done in the face of this official refractoriness ? When it is a matter of life and death it is a serious thing for amateurs to interfere, and recklessly exercise their authority by overriding the opinion of the most famous specialists that are available in the Kingdom. How much greater an act of temerity would it be were it a question of the life and death of a whole nation ! You could, of course, call in another specialist. But who was there whose reputation stood as high in naval councils as Admiral Jellicoe ? Admiral Beatty

*Difficulty of  
intervention in  
Naval policy*

had won some fame as a first-rate fighting sailor of the dashing species. He was of the "well done, Condor" type. But not even to-day would the majority of naval officers rate his judgment as equal to that of Jellicoe, who had only just been brought in because his predecessor was not successful in his anti-submarine measures. Jellicoe had to be given a fair trial. I decided that it was worth spending some time and patience in winning over Jellicoe to the views held by Mr. Bonar Law, the Shipping Controller, Sir Maurice Hankey, and myself. We could not take too long over the process, for our ships were being destroyed at an alarming rate.

I urged the First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir Edward Carson, to insist on the convoy system being tried. Personally he favoured a trial being made, but told me he had no official support from any quarter in his department. The experts were unanimously and stubbornly opposed to the experiment. It was the same old story. Official self-esteem and reputation were involved. The experienced and distinguished sailors had committed themselves to a definite and unqualified opinion, not only in their own special sphere of influence, but outside to all sorts of civilians, shippers, statesmen, and others. They had delivered to each and all their "considered opinion" that convoying was impracticable and dangerous to convoyers and convoyed alike. Why waste time on ridiculous and risky experiments?

Sir John Jellicoe and Admiral Oliver were both able men with an unparalleled knowledge of the technique of their profession. They were both men whose caution and prudence gave their judgment weight. To quote the Welsh version of a well-known text,

*Sir Edward  
Carson  
handicapped*



their "slowness was known to all men."\* With the phlegmatic Briton, slowness of mind is apt to be taken as an indication of soundness of judgment. But when you are confronted with a situation for which there is no precedent and where therefore experience does not count as much as inventiveness, audacity and celerity of decision, such men are a hindrance to effective action. Their experience often tangles them. And on the other hand, their thorough knowledge of the details of the business and their high reputation give them authority which it is difficult for the amateur to set aside or to challenge. In an emergency the able but unimaginative expert is a public danger. In dealing with them Sir Edward Carson's forensic gifts could not be brought into full play. He could hardly cross-examine his First Sea Lord and show him up in the presence of his colleagues as if he were a hostile witness. A peremptory order might produce the resignation of the whole Board. A serious crisis might thus be precipitated. Sir John Jellicoe stood high in the Navy. What was to be done? It was arranged that the First Lord of the Admiralty, the First Sea Lord and I should have a confidential talk on the position. I invited both of them and Admiral Duff, the head of the Anti-Submarine Department, to breakfast at Downing Street on the 13th February, 1917. I submitted to them a memorandum as a basis for our discussion. This memorandum, which was prepared by Sir Maurice Hankey after several consultations we had on the subject, carefully examined the arguments for and against the adoption of the convoy system, and strongly urged that it should be put into

*My consultation with Jellicoe and Duff*

\* Philippians iv, 5.

practice as the most effective means of combating the acute peril of the German submarine attack. The following are extracts from this document :—

“ The general scheme submitted below entails ultimately an entire reorganisation of the Admiralty’s present scheme of anti-submarine warfare, although it might, in  
*The Hankey Memorandum* the first instance, be adopted experimentally on a smaller scale. It involves the institution of a system of scientifically organised convoys, and the concentration on this service of the whole of the anti-submarine craft allotted to the protection of our trade routes, excepting only those vessels devoted to the anti-submarine service of our main fleets. It further involves the concentration on to the convoy system of every means of anti-submarine warfare—the gun, the submarine, the net, the depth charge, the mortar, the hydrophone, and wireless telegraphy. It aims at the effective utilisation of the slower as well as of the faster anti-submarine craft for the convoy system, and it contemplates ultimately the provision of special salvage and life-saving craft and plant to accompany the convoys. The memorandum also contains suggestions for investigations of a technical character for combating the submarine which may or may not be entirely new. . . .”

The memorandum proceeded to examine the objections to the convoy system, and to set against them the far more serious objections to the system then practised. It continued :—

“ How under this system we are ever to avoid losses limited only by the number of the enemy’s

sea-going submarines, and his output of torpedoes, it is difficult to see. The true strategical principle would, of course, be to intercept the enemy near his exits from his ports, and from the very first days of the War the writer has been an ardent and unceasing advocate of the development of an unrestricted policy of mines, which are 'the trench of the sea.' In the early part of the War, however, the Admiralty was utterly unsympathetic to submarine mining, with the result that, in the middle of the third year of the War, our provision for minelaying is utterly inadequate to the needs of the situation."

Out of 20,000 mines in store at that date, on examination it was found that only 1,500 were of any use. As one of our sailors said, when his ship accidentally bumped against one of these dud mines without an explosion: "Good old Vernon. If hit with a hammer he won't go off."\*

Before the War, the Board of Admiralty had concentrated so much on big and still bigger ships that they neglected essential weapons like mines, armour-piercing shells and torpedoes—all of which were inferior to those manufactured by the German. They neglected even to provide us with sufficient small craft. The cost of one Dreadnought spent on the provision of additional destroyers would have made an appreciable difference at this date, when we were short of patrolling and coasting vessels.

The memorandum resumes:—

"Over the system described above the convoy system, if practicable, appears to offer certain very distinct advantages.

\* H.M.S. Vernon was and is a Torpedo and Mining School at Portsmouth.

The enemy can never know the day nor the hour when the convoy will come, nor the route which it will take. The most dangerous and contracted passages can be passed at night. Routes can be selected as far as possible in water so deep that submarine mines cannot be laid. The convoy can be preceded by minesweepers or by vessels fitted with paravanes. The most valuable vessels can be placed in the safest part of the convoy. Neutrals, and other unarmed vessels, can be placed under the protection of armed vessels. The enemy submarine, instead of attacking a defenceless prey, will know that a fight is inevitable in which he may be worsted. All hope of successful surface attack would have to be dismissed at once.

*Advantages of the convoy system*

The adoption of the convoy system would appear to offer great opportunities for mutual support by the merchant vessels themselves, apart from the defence provided by their escorts. Instead of meeting one small gun on board one ship the enemy might be under fire from, say, ten guns, distributed among twenty ships. Each merchant ship might have depth charges, and explosive charges in addition might be towed between pairs of ships, to be exploded electrically. One or two ships with paravanes might save a line of a dozen ships from the mine danger. Special salvage ships . . . might accompany the convoy to save those ships which were mined or torpedoed without sinking immediately, and in any event to save the crews.

Perhaps the best commentary on the convoy system is that it is invariably adopted for our main fleet, and for our transports."

The breakfast discussion, which lasted two hours, evoked a restatement of the Jellicoe objections against convoys with which we were already familiar. The First Lord promised, however, to summon a representative delegation of captains in the mercantile marine in order to ascertain their views as to the practicability of the convoy system. He also under-

*Two convoy experiments* took to abide by the result of two experiments in escorting which had recently been initiated. The first one was between Britain and the Norwegian ports and the other between British and French ports.

But it took time to establish the efficacy of these experiments. Meanwhile, the Admiralty were confirmed in their views from the fact that the Norwegian experiment in its initial form was not a success.

The fact that the experiment was not a systematic convoy, was imperfectly organised and was therefore not given a fair chance, was not taken into account. It was not a success and the Admirals "had told us so."

*Success of French coal convoy* On the other hand, the French convoy trial was proceeding satisfactorily. The coal shipments from England to France had been very severely attacked during the latter part of 1916, and the French asked us to arrange for their escort. It was a great piece of luck for Britain that the task of organising the control was entrusted to a very intelligent young officer who had not been afflicted with hardening of the professional arteries. The Allied cause owes much to Commander (now Admiral) Henderson. With the aid of a small force of armed trawlers he carried out a scheme of daily convoys along three routes, making for Brest, Cherbourg, and Havre. The first experiments

in this method began on 7th February, 1917, and during the three months March, April and May, 4,013 ships were convoyed across those dangerous waters with a total loss of nine vessels—only one in every 446.

This was a very encouraging result. But the indirect effect of the experiment was still more valuable. In order to carry out his work, Commander Henderson found it necessary to make frequent visits to the Ministry of Shipping to consult its officials about sailing arrangements, and they worked harmoniously and well together. Meantime his practical experience in the organisation of convoys led him to the conviction that they were by far the safest way of bringing ships through the danger zone. He found that the larger target offered by a convoy was no more vulnerable than each single ship would have been. A submarine could not count on firing more than a single "browning shot"\* as it was at once attacked by the escort and, in addition, if surfaced, by the guns of the convoyed vessels; and wireless warning to the escort would enable the whole convoy to be diverted from a point where a submarine was known to be operating. Further, the convoy also served the purpose of bringing the submarine to the destroyer instead of the destroyer having to range the Atlantic looking for a periscope.

Henderson made various enquiries from several different Departments of the Admiralty in an effort to find out the volume of our overseas trade and the point of origin, but could get no satisfactory information from them. So he tackled the Ministry of Shipping,

*Commander  
Henderson  
investigates  
the problem*

*Co-operation  
of the  
Ministry of  
Shipping*

\*A shot fired into the brown, i.e., the gloom.

and was referred to Mr. Leslie (now Sir Norman Leslie, K.B.E.), a shipbroker who had offered his services to the new Ministry, and who, with Mr. (now Sir Arthur) Salter, had built up a card-index system to supply the information about shipping and shipping movements which in peace time is obtainable at Lloyds. It was Commander Henderson who found, without surprise, that the Admiralty's statistics of the number of vessels arriving and leaving our shores were grotesquely misleading. Arrivals of ocean-going steamers in the United Kingdom and Channel ports were only about 20 a day, of which 15 came to the United Kingdom ; that is, there were not 2,500 weekly, only 140. The actual number of ocean-going vessels could easily be handled under convoy arrangements.

The Ministry of Shipping took up with enthusiasm the idea of developing a convoy system, and Mr. Leslie co-operated with Commander Henderson in working out the lines upon which such a scheme could be run. The Shipping Controller, Sir Joseph Maclay, repeatedly pressed that convoys should be given a trial, but the Admiralty persisted in opposing the plan in every shape and form. One morning, as the Controller was entering the Cabinet room, he met Jellicoe coming out. The Admiral stopped him and told him that he had had a consultation with 12 mercantile captains, and that not one of them favoured convoys. This step had been taken without any consultation with the Ministry of Shipping, and without affording Sir Joseph Maclay any opportunity of advising us as to the choice of captains, or of meeting the mercantile masters who were chosen and talking the matter over with them. It was highly probable that the

*Conference  
with mercantile  
captains*

form in which Admiral Jellicoe put the question might make the seamen fear that they could never carry out properly the station-keeping and joint manœuvring that membership of a convoy demanded, for he himself was firmly convinced that none but naval men could manage it. When this report was triumphantly presented to me, I was not told that the Shipping Controller had not been consulted as to either the names or the class of ship that ought to be represented at the gathering, and that officers of the smaller tramp were not deemed fit for so exalted a conclave.

In the spring of 1917 the losses amongst vessels sailing to Norway were again so serious that early in April a conference was summoned at Longhope to consider how to protect the Scandinavian trade. The naval officers at that conference were unanimously of opinion that instead of the loose and defective system of protected sailings hitherto adopted for these ships, they ought to be placed in regular convoy. Their report came to the senior officers, who were by no means so unanimous ; but Admiral Beatty strongly supported them, and urged the extension of the convoy system to other shipping. The report of the Longhope Conference was considered by the Admiralty on 11th April, and they agreed as an exceptional measure to allow convoys to be run experimentally for the time being in the Scandinavian trade. Between April and December, 1917, some 6,000 vessels were convoyed between Norway and the Humber, with a total loss of about 70 ships, or just over 1 per cent. In March and April I awaited the result of the French experiment and of the arming of merchantmen in increasing

*The  
Norwegian  
convoy*



numbers. I was hopeful, after the interview I had with Jellicoe and Duff, that more energetic steps would be taken. In this matter I was disappointed.

The attitude of the British Admiralty at that time is well illustrated by the interview which took place *Admiral Sims' account of his interview with Jellicoe* in April between the First Sea Lord and Admiral Sims, of the United States Navy. When it seemed probable that the United States would enter the war, Admiral Sims was dispatched to London to get into touch with the British Admiralty. He reached Liverpool on the 9th April, and proceeded at once to London, where he met Admiral Jellicoe. Here is Admiral Sims' account of the amazing interview which took place between them :—

“ After the usual greetings, Admiral Jellicoe took a paper out of his drawer and handed it to me. It was a record of tonnage losses for the last few months. This showed that the total sinkings, British and neutral, had reached 536,000 tons in February and 630,000 tons in March ; it further disclosed that sinkings were taking place in April which indicated the destruction of nearly 900,000 tons. These figures indicated that the losses were three and four times as large as those which were then being published in the Press. It is expressing it mildly to say that I was surprised by this disclosure. I was fairly astounded ; for I had never imagined anything so terrible. I expressed my consternation to Admiral Jellicoe.

‘ Yes,’ he said, as quietly as though he were discussing the weather and not the future of the British Empire, ‘ it is impossible for us to go on with the war if losses like this continue.’

‘What are you doing about it?’ I asked.

‘Everything we can. We are increasing our anti-submarine forces in every possible way. We are using every possible craft we can find with which to fight submarines. We are building destroyers, trawlers, and other like craft as fast as we can. But the situation is very serious and we shall need all the assistance we can get.’

‘It looks as though the Germans were winning the war,’ I remarked.

‘They will win unless we can stop these losses—and stop them soon,’ the Admiral replied.

‘Is there no solution for the problem?’ I asked.

‘Absolutely none that we can see now,’ Jellicoe announced.”

On 22nd April, 1917, Jellicoe submitted to the War Cabinet a long memorandum on “The Submarine Menace and Food Supply.” It declared that the increasingly heavy losses of our merchant ships by mine and submarine called for immediate action, and the adoption of such measures as were possible; but when he came to make recommendations for this desperately needed action he declared that “The only immediate remedy that was possible was the provision of as many destroyers and other patrol vessels as could be provided by the United States of America.” Pending further means of attacking submarines, the only palliative was more small craft to keep them as much as possible submerged. He did not even hint at convoys as a possible remedy. He enumerated the various methods of attacking submarines that were being attempted, and admitted that the mines then used were worthless.

*Jellicoe's  
memorandum  
of 22/4/17*

Meantime, sinkings were proceeding at such a pace that out of every 100 long-voyage steamers which left this country, 25 failed to return. At this rate, Germany's expectation of bringing us to our knees by August did not seem so improbable an inference to be drawn from the actual facts.

Admiral Sims definitely favoured convoys. Writing on 19th April to his Government, he reported the British methods in use and their failure, and expressed his dissent from the Admiralty view that convoys were impracticable.

*Admiral Sims  
supports  
convoys*

"They are also insistent that it is impracticable for merchant ships to proceed in formation, at least in any considerable numbers, due principally to difficulty in controlling their speed and to the inexperience of their subordinate officers. With this view I do not personally agree but believe that with a little experience merchant vessels could safely and sufficiently well steam in open formations."

The situation was anxiously discussed by the War Cabinet in three sessions of 23rd and 25th April.

In alluding to the recent serious shipping losses, I referred to the possibility of adopting the convoy system, which, I said, was favoured by Admiral Beatty and by Admiral Sims.

*Discussions  
in the War  
Cabinet*

The First Sea Lord reported that the matter was under consideration, one of the chief obstacles to adopting such a scheme being the shortage of torpedo-boat destroyers. He stated that there was some prospect of American destroyers being sent to

assist us, and that six had already been ordered to leave for this country. A much larger number would, however, be necessary, before any scheme of convoy could be introduced. He mentioned that the trial of the convoy system by the Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet had not been altogether successful, two vessels in separate convoys having already been torpedoed and sunk.\*

The First Sea Lord undertook to make a further report on the matter to the War Cabinet.

This shows the characteristic attitude of our naval advisers. The matter was still "under consideration." If two vessels out of some scores or hundreds convoyed were sunk in a month, it seemed a more dreadful thing to the Admiralty than the loss of a score of unescorted vessels in a single day, even though they were just as dependent on our Navy for their protection.

It was clear that the Admiralty did not intend to take any effective steps in the direction of convoying.

After first discussing the matter with Sir Edward Carson, I informed the Cabinet *My visit to the Admiralty* that I had decided to visit the Admiralty and there take peremptory action on the question of convoys. Arrangements were made accordingly with the Board that I should attend a meeting to investigate with them all the means at present in use in regard to anti-submarine warfare. I stipulated for the right to send for any officers, whatever their rank, from whom I desired information.

Apparently the prospect of being overruled in their own sanctuary galvanised the Admiralty into a fresh inquisition, and by way of anticipating the inevitable they further examined the plans and figures which

\* This refers to the experiment made on the Scandinavian Front.

Commander Henderson had prepared in consultation with Mr. Norman Leslie of the Ministry of Shipping. They then for the first time began to realise the fact which had been ignored by them since August, 1914, that the figures upon which they had based their strategy were ludicrous, and that therefore protection for a convoy system was within the compass of their resources.

Accordingly, when I arrived at the Admiralty I found the Board in a chastened mood. We discussed the whole matter in detail. We agreed to conclusions which I thus reported to the Cabinet.

"I was gratified to learn from Admiral Duff that he had completely altered his view in regard to the adoption of a system of convoy, and I gather that the First Sea Lord *The convoy system accepted* shares his views, at any rate to the extent of an experiment. Admiral Duff is not enamoured with the system, but a number of circumstances have combined to bring him to the view, which I believe most of my colleagues share, that, at any rate, an experiment in this direction should be made. One of these reasons is that now that the United States of America have entered the War, he thinks it should be possible to find escorts which were formerly impracticable. Another is that experience has shown that he cannot rely on merchant ships to find salvation from the submarine by zigzagging and dousing their lights, and he therefore estimates these factors as a means of protection to a single ship lower than he formerly did. Moreover, as a result of an investigation in concert with a representative of the Shipping Controller, he finds that the number

of ships for which convoy will have to be supplied is more manageable than he had thought. Further, the losses which he last reported to me on the subject were not in his opinion sufficient to justify the adoption of this experiment, which, he warned me, might involve a great disaster. Now, however, he calculates that he could afford to lose three ships out of every convoy without being worse off than at present, and he therefore thinks the experiment justifiable. . . .

I much regret that some time must elapse before convoys can be in full working order, and I consider that the Admiralty ought to press on with the matter as rapidly as possible.

As the views of the Admiralty are now in complete accord with the views of the War Cabinet on this question, and as convoys have just come into operation on some routes and are being organised on others, further comment is unnecessary. . . .”

The “complete accord” turned out in actual working to be a rather optimistic estimate of the situation. As my minute shows, neither Admiral Jellicoe nor Admiral Duff really believed in the principle of convoys, though they were willing to assent to a cautious trial of this expedient. They had been convinced against their will and at heart remained of the same opinion still.

The High Admirals had at last been persuaded by the “Convoyers” not perhaps to take action, but to try action. But there was a reluctance and a tardiness in their movements. They acted as men whose doubts are by no means removed, and who therefore proceed with excessive caution and with an ill-concealed expectation that their forebodings will

be justified by the experience. When anything went wrong with convoyed ships, it was reported with an "I told you so" air to the War Cabinet. I can find no minute where the First Sea Lord reported the unquestionable success of the system in cases where it was fairly tried. There was a Cabinet meeting held a week or two after the decision to experiment in convoying. It was attended amongst others by Admiral Jellicoe, Admiral Duff, Sir William Robertson and Commander Henderson.

*My insistence  
on Gibraltar  
convoy*

I listened to the Admiralty argument on the lack of escorts in the form of cruisers and destroyers, but I insisted on their giving a trial to the Gibraltar convoy. The First Sea Lord at this meeting held forth as to the necessity of maintaining the Grand Fleet destroyers up to the number of 100 and the Harwich Force as constituted. He maintained that these destroyers were necessary to fulfil the Cabinet's instructions given to the Admiralty and to the Commander-in-Chief in regard to battle with the German High Seas Fleet, and if destroyers were withdrawn then the general instructions to the higher command must be revised.

Commander Henderson said that he considered that if convoys could be put into being forthwith, it would probably take Germany three months to discover the best method of locating and attacking, during which period we should have further time for thought and for construction.

After this discussion it was decided to try the first experimental convoy from Gibraltar to the United Kingdom. Ships from the Mediterranean to the East Coast were held up for four days from the 6th May, till on the 10th, a convoy of 17 steamers started under

*The first  
experiments*

the escort of two "Q" ships, the *Mavis* and *Rule*, which had been sent out from this country for the purpose.

It was not until the 17th May—over three weeks after the Cabinet decision—that the Admiralty went so far as to appoint a Committee to study the question of regular convoys. This Committee sat for three weeks and went into the whole question of conveying minutely and with great care. They had to settle routes and the number of ships in each convoy—how to group them according to speed—the sailing instructions to be given. They had also to extort protecting craft from the Admiralty. It was a laborious process, for the Board were convinced that their torpedo boats were more usefully employed on other duties. In arriving at their final recommendations the Committee were helped by the success that attended two experiments.

"During the sittings of the Committee, the convoy from Hampton Roads with H.M.S. *Roxburgh* (Captain Whitehead, R.N.) as ocean escort had sailed on 24th May with 12 ships; two of these vessels, the *Ravenshoe*, with a cargo of sugar, and the *Highbury* with nitrate, were detached, because they could not keep up with the convoy, and sent into Halifax to be routed independently. . . . The convoy arrived safely in 15 days.

Captain Whitehead reported to the First Sea Lord *that the station-keeping was excellent, and that he was prepared to take charge of 30 vessels instead of 12.*"\*

The Gibraltar convoy was equally successful. But these disappointing successes simply irritated the

\* Extract from Ministry of Shipping Report on Convoys.



Admirals into sullen recalcitrance. The Shipping Controller's report states that :—

“ Although Board approval had been vouchsafed to the Committee's scheme on the 14th June, it was in the letter rather than in the spirit, as the indispensable forces were not made available.”\*

The Controller reported this attitude to me, and I had to convey to the Admiralty in peremptory terms my disapproval of their conduct. They at last “ consented to give effect to their own approval.”†

On 6th June the Committee presented its report, setting out a detailed plan. The report was adopted and Paymaster-Commander Manisty made “ Organising Manager of Convoys ” (not “ Director,” as is customary for heads of important Departments) : but he was given neither room nor a staff, and had to go round and “ scrounge ” for these as best he could. And although the report was formally adopted on 14th June, it was some time before the Admiralty could bring itself to scrape together the necessary escorting craft. Regular convoys only began to run from America on 2nd July, from Gibraltar on 26th July, and from Dakar on 11th August. Of the 279 destroyers in Home waters, between 20 and 30 were allotted to convoy duties. The 279 included 100 destroyers attached to the Grand Fleet, to watch over its cold storage at Scapa Flow, and Admiral Jellicoe claims some credit for having allowed from 8 to 12 of these to be used during part of 1917 for trade protection on the convoy routes off the Irish coast. It was a grudging and mean allowance, when we were fighting for bare life against

\* Extract from Ministry of Shipping Report on Convoys.

† Ministry of Shipping Report on Convoys.

the stranglehold of the U-boats, and when an attack by the German High Seas Fleet upon our vastly stronger Grand Fleet was an extremely remote possibility. But there is no wrath like the cold fury of the professional spirit proved wrong by outsiders, and no folly comparable to its reactions under such conditions. In spite of everything the convoy system proved a brilliant success. The Admirals were in despair over the refusal of events to follow the lead of professional knowledge.

To quote again from the Official Report of the Shipping Department, in reference to the convoys from the U.S.A. :—

*“ The success of these convoys was phenomenal. Fourteen convoys comprising 242 steamers were brought in without the loss of a vessel, although the convoys were sometimes attacked, and a tanker, the Wabasha in the fourth convoy from Hampton Roads, was hit by a ‘ browning shot.’ With the assistance of the escort on the spot she was brought in with only the loss of part of her cargo, and the offensive side of the system was demonstrated by a heavy attack on the submarine with depth charges. Had she been a solitary ship, even if guarded by several destroyers, it is probable she would have been torpedoed several times until she sank. . . . ”*

But we were not yet at the end of our troubles with the Admiralty. Here is another illustration of their stubborn hostility and of the effort they expended in circumnavigating it.

“ It was not until the 26th July that the Gibraltar convoy began to run regularly. The reluctance of

the Board (of Admiralty) to meet this group of ships with a trawler escort, in the absence of sufficient destroyers, was a stumbling block, but this was ultimately overcome, and the success of this convoy, which was practically never out of the danger zone, and which never had anything but a trawler escort, strengthened with one destroyer, and generally only a 'Q' ship or an American gunboat for ocean escort, has been wonderful."\*

The difficulties experienced by the War Cabinet in handling this problem are inherent in all war operations when civilian opinion clashes with that of the experts. Naval science and strategy are matters very remote from the lay comprehension, and the aura of authority glistened round the heads of the Naval High Command. Whenever I urged the adoption of the convoy system, I was met, as I have related, with the blank wall of assertion that the experts of the Admiralty knew on technical grounds that it was impossible. That is a very difficult argument to counter.

*Value of the layman's suggestions*

A persistence of a few more weeks in their refusal to listen to advice from outside would have meant irretrievable ruin for the Allies. Neptune's trident would have been snatched out of Britannia's hands by the ravening monster of the great deep. It was not the first time in this War that the lesson was driven home—luckily in time—that no great national enterprise can be carried through successfully in peace or in war except by a trustful co-operation between expert and layman—tendered freely by both, welcomed cordially by both.

\* Extract from Ministry of Shipping Report on Convoys.

When individual cases of impeding and blocking were brought to my notice I could exert the necessary pressure, but time was being lost and lost time meant lost ships and lost lives. So *Changes at the Admiralty* I made up my mind to effect a change at the top in the Admiralty. Obviously, unless I were present at the Admiralty every day to supervise every detail of administration, it would be impossible for me promptly to remove all hindrances and speed up action. I therefore contemplated a change in the First Lord, Lord Carson, and the First Sea Lord, Admiral Jellicoe. They were both men of great influence and authority, and both possessed a formidable following, one political, the other naval. I discovered there were Parties in the Navy—the Jellicoe Party and the Beatty Party. Like most Parties their differences of principle were too vague for an outsider to grasp. But the more obscure the doctrine the more fierce the personalities.

As to Lord Carson, he was conscious of half-heartedness in his official associates. Their stubbornness wore him down by wearing him out. They were obstinate, slow and self-willed. Carson was not cut out for a mule driver. That was not his function in life. He had plenty of courage and independence of his own, but being new to Administrative office, and especially to Admiralty business, he was very dependent on his official advisers and he shrank from seeking independent advice. Without that he was lost.

He could have obtained it without going outside the Navy for which he was officially responsible. He might have sought the opinion of men in the service. But his whole training was opposed to such a resort. In his profession he could only call

into conference those whose names were on the back of his brief—second leaders, juniors and solicitors.

*Mental alertness of younger naval officers* To call another counsellor into the room and to take another into his confidence, was to imply distrust of his colleagues and therefore a professional disloyalty.

He therefore only availed himself of the advice of the acknowledged Admiralty chiefs. The perplexity he was in and the impotence in which he was enveloped preyed upon his health. I have never taken the view that the head of a Government Department is forbidden by any rule of honour or etiquette from sending for any person either inside or outside his office, whatever his rank, to seek enlightenment on any subject affecting his administration. If a Minister learns that any subordinate in his Department possesses exceptional knowledge or special aptitude on any question, it is essential he should establish direct contact with him. The political head of a Department has not merely the right, but the duty to send for anyone who will help him to discharge his trust to the public. That principle would apply to both the political and permanent heads of a Department. Lord Carson did not see his way to adopt this point of view. The result was that although his natural shrewdness and penetration enabled him to perceive that things were not moving in the right direction, or as rapidly as they ought, he could not find out exactly the point where they stuck, how to remove the obstruction or how to speed up.

Before I was called to the Premiership I was not in contact with the Navy and knew little of what was going on in that sphere. On the military side the Ministry of Munitions brought me into direct touch with the problems of land warfare. Apart

from that I constantly met officers and men home on leave who had spent months at the battle front and had been taking part daily in the incessant engagements—great and small—of the campaign in Flanders or France. It is not merely a boast but a fact that I had more converse with fighting officers and men, untabbed with scarlet, straight from the trenches, than had any member of the Staff either at General Headquarters or at the War Office.

*My contacts  
with fighting  
officers and men*

When I meet men possessing special knowledge and experience on any subject, it has been my habit through life to question them on the theme they know and like best. The information I thus acquire leaves a deeper and more ineradicable impression on my mind than what is communicated to me in any other way. Much study is a weariness to the flesh, but conversations with a knowledgeable person stimulate and refresh and nourish one's mind. Had I depended entirely on departmental chiefs, I could never have carried through my schemes of Old Age Pensions or Insurance. I know the importance of maintaining discipline in a Department. Our public services are manned by some of the best and most competent men in this or any country, and it is essential to efficiency that their legitimate power and prestige in their respective spheres should be fully maintained. But freedom of access to independent information is quite compatible with order and due respect for the hierarchy, if that liberty is tactfully and judiciously exercised by the Minister and wisely acquiesced in by the service. There must be no appearance of flouting the men at the top. On the other hand, they must not make it impossible to act without forcing an open disregard of their authority.

When as Prime Minister I became responsible for the efficient administration of every department of the Government, I took every opportunity afforded me officially or unofficially of acquainting myself with the major questions which affected the conduct of the War in every branch of the public service. The Admiralty and the Shipping Controller brought to my notice all the problems arising out of the struggle on the High Seas. The Shipping Controller soon formed a poor opinion of the Admiralty Board. But my most reliable inside information on the naval aspect of my problem came from another source. I was fortunate enough to obtain the same access to men who had seen active service on the seas as I had already secured in land warfare. I owe much to Commander Kenworthy for making me acquainted at this critical stage with the views of the younger officers in the Navy. I was introduced to Kenworthy through the good offices of the late Sir Herbert Lewis, who was then Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Education. I met some of these junior officers and I realised that there was a school of highly intelligent naval men who were very critical of the High Admirals and their methods. They condemned severely their anti-submarine plans. They were scornful of their opinions on the subject of convoys. But what provoked their hostility more than anything was the chilly discouragement accorded by those at Headquarters to any proposals or suggestions from men who were actively engaged in the struggle on the High Seas. When it is borne in mind that the Admirals had themselves filed a petition in bankruptcy to the War Cabinet, as far as their own stock of new ideas was concerned, this lofty disdain of any offer to

*Commander  
Kenworthy's  
assistance*

replenish their mental warehouses was unpardonable. I urged Sir Edward Carson to utilise the services of those men in the Anti-Submarine Department of the Admiralty. He was fully in sympathy with the idea, and undertook to see that their services should be utilised.

At a meeting of the Cabinet War Committee on 20th June, 1917, I asked the First Sea Lord whether the Admiralty were making any progress in the organisation of an Offensive Section of the Operations Division. Admiral Jellicoe's contempt for junior officers Jellicoe said that the First Lord had thought it would be a good plan to assemble some junior officers to form a section for investigating offensive operations. *He himself felt it was not much use putting junior officers there. He could not give the time to examine numbers of projects, and he himself had examined all the possibilities of offensive action.* Captain Richmond's name had been proposed for this section, but the First Lord told us that after seeing Captain Richmond he had rejected it. Another officer, selected by himself, was coming up to the Admiralty in his place. He felt, however, *that this section would very likely only waste his time*, though he hoped to be able to refer to them the working out in detail of his own projects.

It is also interesting to record Admiral Jellicoe's opinion as to the offensive value of an overwhelming fleet. I was dissatisfied that our Navy, with all its tremendous power, could do so little against the Belgian harbours which were used as bases for the German submarine and torpedo flotillas, and I asked Jellicoe whether, if the German Fleet had the same preponderance over ours as we and the Americans together now enjoyed over theirs, they



could not make Dover or Harwich untenable for our fleets. He denied that we had an overwhelming preponderance, except in battleships, and further stated that even if the Germans held an overwhelming preponderance, they could not render either Harwich or Dover untenable. Harwich was defended by navigational conditions, in which respect it resembled Zeebrugge and Ostend. Dover could be bombarded, but our ships could come back as soon as the bombardment was over. You could not render a harbour so unpleasant that ships could not use it. Our Grand Fleet could not go nearer to Zeebrugge than 18,000 yards range ; and if monitors, which were unarmed, closed to that range, they would be sunk.

This was Jellicoe's view, alike of the possibility of offensive action by the Navy, and of the resource and ability of the younger naval officers. Captain—now Admiral Sir Herbert—Richmond, to whom reference was made, was one of the able young men whom I found helpful in this emergency.

I passed on to the First Lord of the Admiralty the information I derived from these young officers. But he found it impossible to overcome the solid and stolid resistance of his Board of Admirals. I decided, therefore, to put someone in charge who was accustomed to force his will on his subordinates.

When my Administration was formed I was convinced that Sir Edward Carson's great gifts would be better employed by giving him a seat on the War Cabinet. I had designated Lord Milner for the Admiralty. In that choice I was overridden by the personal prejudices of the majority of the Conservative

*His disbelief  
in offensive  
power of our  
Fleet*

*Carson in  
the wrong  
place*

leaders against Carson. They all admired but disapproved of him. Curzon neither admired nor liked him. Long, who magnified his own influence and position in the Conservative Party, was jealous of the idea of including Carson in a War Cabinet from which he was excluded. So Carson had been kept out of a place for which he was qualified and fitted to a post for which he was unsuited. Every Ministry suffers from these misfortunes and misfits.

A few months' experience of an appointment forced on me against my own judgment of its aptness drove me to the conclusion that a change must be effected in the interests of Sir Edward Carson himself. His own exasperation at the obstacles thrown in the path of effective action was visibly telling on his strength. Someone was needed at the head of the Admiralty with a greater reserve of vitality, with more resource and greater mastery of detail. A conversation I had with Sir Douglas Haig in the early summer of 1917 finally decided me. The Commander-in-Chief was also alarmed at the dismaying ravages of the submarine. He was apprehensive that the War might be lost at sea before he had an opportunity of winning it on land. He had great admiration for Jellicoe's knowledge as a technical sailor, but he thought him much too rigid, narrow and conservative in his ideas. As to Sir Edward Carson, I am afraid Sir Douglas Haig had no opinion of his qualities as an administrator. He thought he was distinctly out of place at the Admiralty. He strongly urged upon me the appointment of Sir Eric Geddes to that post. The power, and especially the punch, which Sir Eric had displayed in the reorganisation of transport to and in France had made a

considerable impression on the Commander-in-Chief's mind. Geddes was then engaged in the vital task of putting fresh life into the construction of ships to fill up the dark gaps made by the enemy in our Mercantile Marine.

Mr. Bonar Law agreed as to the desirability of effecting a change if it could be done without offending Sir Edward Carson. We had both a great personal regard for Carson and we were anxious not to give him any hurt. But as he knew that we had always been of opinion that he would have rendered greater service to his country in the War Cabinet than in any administrative office, we could honestly present to him the case for a transfer from Admiralty House to the Council Chamber on that ground. Nevertheless, although membership of the War Directorate was a more exalted and powerful position, I am afraid he felt wounded by the change. To him it was an unpalatable proposal, however much we might wrap it up. But his intense patriotic sense prevailed over any personal feeling. So Carson joined the War Cabinet and Geddes went to the Admiralty. The conduct of the War benefited by the double change.

What about Admiral Jellicoe? Sir Eric Geddes, in his acceptance of the position of First Lord, stipulated that Jellicoe should not be immediately removed. Geddes knew that Jellicoe had the confidence of the senior officers in the Navy, and that it would therefore be a distinct advantage to secure his co-operation if that were at all possible. He promised to tell me without delay if he found that he could not work with or through him.

It was not long before he discovered that the

proper co-ordination and full efficiency of the Admiralty were being seriously handicapped by personal factors, among which was the lack of sympathetic confidence between Admiral Beatty, Commanding the Grand Fleet, and Admiral Jellicoe, the First Sea Lord. This disagreement had existed since differences had arisen between them about the Battle of Jutland. After consultation with me, Geddes decided to bring in a Deputy First Sea Lord, to facilitate co-operation between the Grand Fleet, the Harwich Force, and the Admiralty. To this post he appointed Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss (afterwards Lord Wemyss). Wemyss, although a good sailor, was not a man of outstanding ability. But he had two special qualities which were conspicuously helpful under the conditions prevailing at that time in the Admiralty. He was not a factionist. He was neither a Jellicoeite nor a Beattyite. He was quite friendly with both. The second attribute which commended him to Geddes was that he was willing to listen to young officers with ideas. He never stared them out of his room. His eyeglass greeted them with a friendly gleam.

Geddes also proceeded to develop a Plans Division of the Admiralty, at the head of which he placed Rear-Admiral Keyes (afterwards Sir Roger Keyes), to study plans for offensive enterprises by the Navy in the Narrow Seas. A "Channel Barrage Committee" was set up on 17th November, 1917, with Admiral Keyes as Chairman.

But the inertia and lack of co-ordination in the Admiralty resisted these measures, and on 21st December, 1917, we found Geddes urging at a Cabinet meeting that he should leave the Admiralty to take charge of the co-ordination of land and sea transport

for all the Allies. The Allied Governments were in complete agreement that Geddes was the best man for this important task. Transportation was at that time an acute problem, and the War Cabinet fully recognised that Sir Eric Geddes was by far the best if not indeed the only person qualified to deal effectively with it. But we felt that we could not spare him from the Admiralty. An explanation of his readiness to consider the other post was forthcoming when that afternoon he came to see me at Downing Street and told me that he had come to the conclusion that he could not give of his best at the Admiralty if Admiral Jellicoe remained there as First Sea Lord. Bonar Law, Geddes and I then went into the whole matter, and Geddes explained that while he was on the best of terms with Jellicoe, and had the highest regard for him, and had no intention of trying, as a civilian, to override the Admirals in technical matters, he felt that he could make no progress there with Jellicoe. Wemyss, on the other hand, was a man who would give opportunities to the younger men, and was on the best of terms with Beatty. During the time he had been at the Admiralty as Deputy First Sea Lord, Wemyss had encouraged the active brains in the Planning Division and indeed throughout the Admiralty.

Bonar Law agreed with me that in the circumstances a change was now desirable. We had as a matter of fact thought so for a long time, but had undertaken to give Geddes an opportunity to make up his own mind, and after six months' trial he had come to the same conclusion that we had previously reached—a conclusion shared by Sir Douglas Haig, who had intimate knowledge alike of Admiral Jellicoe's qualities

and of the situation at the Admiralty. Haig happened to be in London about this time and expressed his mind freely about the desirability of change.

Sir Eric motored to Sandringham on Christmas Day, where he shared Christmas dinner with the King and Royal Family, and brought back His Majesty's consent to the change at the Admiralty. Jellicoe resigned his post as First Sea Lord on the following day, and was succeeded by Sir Rosslyn Wemyss; and Admiral Keyes replaced Admiral Bacon at Dover. Among the fruits of this rearrangement may be reckoned the carrying through of the attack on Zeebrugge and Ostend by the Dover Patrol Force under Keyes—one of the most gallant and spectacular achievements of the War.

As First Lord of the Admiralty, Geddes' overriding vitality was soon felt in every branch of activity.

*Geddes' work at the Admiralty* Difficulties and hesitancies disappeared in every direction. There was a quickening in action all round. The convoy system at last had a fair chance. It was

extended, strengthened, improved in every direction. The naval officers who were whole-heartedly for it were encouraged. The attack on the submarine was developed. The Nash invention of the "fish" hydrophone was attached without delay to patrolling vessels. Many other new and ingenious expedients were resorted to for breaking down and destroying the submarine. Best of all, there was real drive

*German submarine losses* put into all these operations. In spite of their increase in power and speed, the enemy submarines began to suffer rapidly growing losses from the effect of the vigorous campaign against them which was now being carried on. This fact is shown by the official

German figures of their War Losses in submarines, year by year, which are as follows :—

1914	..	5	submarines lost by enemy action			
1915	..	19	”	”	”	”
1916	..	22	”	”	”	”
1917	..	63	”	”	”	”
1918	..	69	”	”	”	”

From the end of July, 1917, to the end of October, 1918, we were sinking German submarines at an average rate of seven every month.

In August, convoys were also instituted for outward-bound ships, a measure proposed in the original scheme of the committee, but at first postponed on account of the alleged difficulty of providing escorts. From this time until the end of the War, convoyed ships enjoyed a considerable and growing immunity from submarine attack. As the “Official History” states :—

*Outward  
convoys  
instituted*

“The experience gained showed that a convoy had intrinsically great powers of evasion, in that it was almost impossible for a submarine commander to place himself right upon its track, at the right time of the day, and in a good position for attacking it, when its course and time of arrival were completely unknown to him. The great successes of the submarine commanders had hitherto been due to the immensity of their target : they had only to post themselves outside the patrolled routes somewhere between the Fastnets and Scillies, and they were practically certain to sight merchantmen if they waited for them. Some areas were better than others, but as the whole zone was

traversed by merchant traffic it was in the German sense productive. The passage of these convoys through the danger area showed that, if the system could be developed and extended, it would alter the whole aspect of submarine warfare. The German submarine commanders would no longer be able to go to a fruitful area and there lie in wait : henceforward they would be compelled to seek out and attack groups of ships of whose movements they knew nothing—a very much more difficult task, and one which in many cases would be quite impossible.”\*

That verdict was fully confirmed by the statistics of convoys. . Between the summer of 1917 and the end of the hostilities in November, 1918, some 16,657 vessels were convoyed to or from this country. The total losses, including 16 sunk by marine peril and 36 ships sunk when not in contact with the convoy, amounted to 154 vessels, or less than 1 per cent. of the vessels convoyed. Alike in number and in gross tonnage the total number and tonnage of the ships lost in convoy during nearly a year and a half of unrestricted warfare were considerably less than the losses incurred during the single month of April, 1917, before the first convoys were introduced.

Under Rear-Admiral Duff's leadership the convoy system, benefiting by experience, kept improving each month. The difficulties about varying speeds were adjusted satisfactorily. Here are some extracts from a Report presented to me after the new regime had been in operation for some time :—

*Progress of  
convoy system :  
Extracts  
from Report*

\* “Naval Operations,” Vol. V, p. 51.



“ . . . The geographical limits for the various Atlantic Coast convoys were relaxed, and ships were apportioned to the convoys in accordance with their speeds, provided there was no deviation involving delay in reaching this side. . . .

(September) By these means all ships, Allied and Neutral, homeward bound to United Kingdom or French Atlantic ports, whatever their speed, were now brought into convoy.”

Neutrals were still suffering heavy losses. Their ships, even when engaged in Allied transport, were not convoyed, either by us or by their own warships. A discussion arose as to whether it was not in our interest to offer them the same protection as was afforded to our own ships. The objection to our doing so lay in the danger of their giving codes and courses away to the enemy—either advertently or inadvertently.

Here are summaries of a few of the Reports which came in to encourage those who believed in the convoy system, and to confute those who predicted that it would turn out to be a failure :—

“ Of 115 wheat ships which sailed from Newport News between the 2nd July and the 10th of October, four were sunk out of 18 independent sailings, and only one, the *Noya*, was sunk out of 97 ships in convoys. This ship had got separated from her convoy.

Further figures taken later on showed that the risk of a ship in convoy was only a tenth of that run by a steamer proceeding independently.

There seems no doubt that many of the enemy submarines were afraid to attack a convoy. Not only were they liable to instant counter-attack by

the destroyers, but the mere appearance of a convoy of merchant vessels was very unnerving when seen through a periscope. To take up from ahead a suitable position for attack, when some 25 steamers each with a different turning circle were performing a zigzag was more than any but the ablest and most daring German Commander cared to tackle; the larger the convoy, the more unpleasant it looked, and it is the case that in the Atlantic most of the successful attacks were made either by 'browning shots,' or by torpedoes fired at a straggler, who for some reason had failed to maintain his proper situation in the convoy."

. . . . .

"By the middle of August it became very noticeable that the enemy, failing to find the homeward-bound traffic as easily as before, was now devoting more attention to the outward-bound vessels. At the end of April the proportion sunk had been 7 per cent. outward bound as compared with 18 per cent. homeward bound. Now while the numbers of inward-bound losses were rapidly decreasing, the sinkings of outward-bound tonnage were becoming more numerous."

Thereupon, as I have already mentioned, we made arrangements for convoying outward-bound vessels. This threw a great additional strain on the escorting destroyers, and the Report notes that :—

"The crews (of the escorting destroyers) were very hard worked, several of the officers broke down under the constant strain, and the vessels themselves suffered severely as the winter came on."

"By the end of October, 1917, 99 homeward convoys had been brought in, comprising 1,502 steamers of an estimated total deadweight capacity of 10,656,300 tons, with a loss of 0.66 per cent., or 10 vessels, torpedoed while actually in contact with the convoy. The number of ships which had been sunk after being separated from their convoys by bad weather or the disobedience of their masters was 14. So that the gross total, including these vessels, was only 1.57 per cent. With experience and as masters realised more generally that their safety depended on their continuance with their convoy, the difference between the nett and gross percentage became appreciably less, the figures at the signing of the armistice being 0.78 per cent. lost when in convoy formation and 1.13 per cent. including those which had lost touch with the convoy."

... .

"... This meant in effect that tonnage being sunk was no longer for the most part large steamers homeward bound with cargoes, but smaller vessels in the coasting trade, and steamers bound round the coast in ballast to load at Cardiff or elsewhere, with a certain number of ships on their way to an assembly port for outward convoy."

... .

"Another notable change produced by the convoy system was the practical disappearance of 'sunk by gunfire' which had accounted for a large percentage of the vessels lost prior to August-September, 1917.

The statistics for British ships only, at the end of December, 1917, showed that whereas during

the five months April to August, the losses over 50 miles from the land were 175, an average of 35 per month ; during the period from September to December, the ships sunk at this distance from the land for the whole four months only reached a total of six of which four were sunk in September."

The most gratifying feature of this success was the increased security achieved for the brave mariners who were risking their lives for their country.

*Increased  
safety of  
seamen* "The result of this from the point of view of life saving was enormous ; it meant that a crew, even when their ship was torpedoed, and they had to take to their boats, were rarely more than 10 or 20 miles from the land, and probably had 'a coastal patrol boat to their assistance in less than half an hour. This was a very different ordeal from that which had to be faced in the first six months of 1917, when the ships were sunk 200 and 300 miles from the land, and when the majority of those who managed to get into their boats died from exposure before they reached land or were picked up.

Moreover, it practically eliminated the danger of the master or chief engineer being taken prisoner by the submarine. This was a device which the Germans had adopted with a view of impairing morale, and it is a credit to the Mercantile Marine that they stood for so long the risks to which they were opposed with very little chance of retaliation. How long their courage would have stood the test had the convoy system not altered conditions at sea is a debatable question."

. . . . .

"The possibility of salving a torpedoed ship was also vastly increased by this change of tactics which had been forced on the Bosche."

"In the early days of convoys, the thing was to get the ships and cargoes home, and although many more or less accurate calculations (one very elaborate estimate was drawn up by the Germans and published in their Press) were presented to the Convoy Department to show how delay reduced the amount of imports, it was obvious that a ship 'in being,' however slow, was a better asset than a ship at the bottom of the sea, no matter how quickly she got there.

When the system had thoroughly proved its worth, and experience had been gained of where and how the delays arose, steps were taken to remedy the defects as far as possible. The first step was the formation of convoys of faster speeds which has already been dealt with. . . ."

The convoy system, supplemented by the arming of merchantmen and the application of new expedients and devices for chasing and chivvying and hunting down the submarines, thus furnished the solution for the submarine problem, and saved the country from this deadly menace. But a system is unavailing without men. No praise can adequately recognise the courage and efficiency of the officers and men who manned the vessels which convoyed our ships through all perils, and those also which were engaged in hunting out and hunting down the piratical craft that lurked in the shadows of the deep.

*Courage of  
our merchant  
seamen*

But among all the resources on which Britain was able to draw, in her efforts to meet the challenge of the U-boats, none deserves to be placed higher than the courage and devotion of our merchant seamen and fishermen. These proved to be of a quality far beyond the calculations of the German Admiralty.

The enemy unquestionably reckoned on being able by a campaign of frightfulness to intimidate our sailors from putting to sea. No other explanation is possible of the numerous cases of brutality and outrage that were perpetrated—presumably by express order of the High Command—against defenceless men after their vessels had been torpedoed and sunk. The firing on and scuttling of open boats at sea, the triumphant proclamation of ships "*spürlos versenkt*"—sunk without trace, their whole crews being drowned mercilessly—were all intended to shake the morale of British seamen and make them unwilling to sign on for further voyages. But in this object the German Navy was completely unsuccessful.

I remember meeting an old sea-captain on board the boat in which I was returning from France after one of our Inter-Allied Conferences during the War. I asked him what he was doing there, and the grizzled skipper told me he had just been torpedoed for, I think, the sixth time, and was now making his way back to Liverpool to take charge of another ship and face the U-boats once again.

In a letter written to me on 25th October, 1917, the late Havelock Wilson, Secretary of the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union, said :—

" We have a very large number of the members of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union who have

been in as many as five or six ships that have been torpedoed, yet every one of these men the moment they have landed on shore have immediately sought employment on other ships to proceed to sea. I have heard of one man who has been in no less than seven vessels that have been torpedoed and is now away on a voyage. I have also known cases where men have returned to port after having been on vessels torpedoed ; they were then entitled to draw from the Union sums varying from £4 to £5 for shipwreck claims, which we invariably settle within 48 hours. These men, however, instead of waiting for their money, have immediately obtained other vessels, and proceeded to sea before their claims were settled ; they have often had the misfortune to sign on other vessels which were sunk and on their return to port have drawn accumulative claims for two or three shipwreck benefits. . . .

A large number of men during last winter experienced days of agony and suffering in open boats, many of them have had to have their limbs amputated. On our visits to these men in hospital, each and every one of them have expressed their regret that they were not able to render further assistance to their King and Country.

I have myself been in close touch with the members of the Union, and I have not met one man yet who has expressed a fear to face the dangers, as each and every one of them fully realises how important it is to keep the ships running to meet the needs of the people of these islands and also serve the Army and Navy with men and stores. . . .”

How serious those dangers were is clearly shown by the casualty returns. In the Royal Navy, including *Naval and Mercantile Marine casualties* Marines, Air Service, the R.N.R. and R.N.V.R. and all other auxiliary branches, the total number of officers and men who were killed in action or died of wounds during the War was 22,811. These include a considerable number of sailors from amongst the fishermen and the Mercantile Marine who were doing naval work and were on the pay-roll of the British Navy. If deaths from other causes are included the total becomes 34,654. The number of lives lost in British Merchant and Fishing vessels between 4th August, 1914, and 11th November, 1918, was 15,313. The deaths in the Royal Navy during the War bore to the total number of those who served in it the proportion of 5.41 per cent. In the Mercantile Marine, the proportion of lives lost was about  $7\frac{1}{2}$  per cent. of the persons employed in our merchant shipping. It was a far more dangerous service than was our official fighting service on the sea. But, as Mr. Havelock Wilson's letter testified, the survivors were as ready as ever to brave the perils of the submarine-infested seas in the service of their country. Without rank or uniform they ventured as gallantly as any of the men in our fighting services, and it was to their valour and tenacity as much as to the skill and bravery displayed by the crews of our patrolling and escorting craft that we owed our triumph over the deadliest craft that ever menaced our pathways across the deep.

It is perhaps hardly realised how important were the services of our fishing craft and fishermen in maintaining the defence and escort of our merchant shipping. While we were able to make valuable use



of all the destroyers which could be spared from service with the Fleet, and of all that the Americans could furnish, in the task of escorting our shipping convoys, a great deal of the work of watching over the safety of our merchantmen was carried out by armed trawlers. It is repeatedly stated by apologists for the Admiralty that although convoys were successful when they were eventually introduced, this was only because the advent of America had given us a supply of T.B.D.'s for escort work. But it must be borne in mind that the first successful line of regular convoys—those organised for the French coal trade by Commander Henderson—made no use of T.B.D.'s at all. Some of the convoys went without added guard, their strength being their mutual support, manœuvring in rough formation along a specially appointed route. Mostly, however, they were escorted by armed trawlers, of which Commander Henderson had altogether some 26 available for protecting the three main routes followed by his coal vessels. The "Official History" remarks that: "the exceptional immunity that the French coal trade enjoyed since it had been placed under this modified system of convoy was certainly remarkable. During the quarter ending April, 1917, rather fewer than 30 armed trawlers had given protection to over 4,000 cross-Channel voyages."

It cannot be doubted in the face of these experiences that an earlier and fuller use of our armed trawlers in escort work for convoyed vessels would have saved us a very considerable volume of the tonnage which went to the bottom of the sea in 1916 and the earlier part of 1917, before systematic convoys were instituted, or the American Navy became a contributor to our protective forces upon the sea.

The rate at which British vessels were sunk by enemy action showed a steady decline in 1918 from the appalling height which it had reached in the spring of 1917. The figures of our total tonnage losses from this cause during the War years are as follows :—

<i>Statistics of our shipping losses</i>	<i>Year.</i>	<i>Gross Tonnage of British Vessels sunk by enemy action.</i>
	1914 .....	252,738
	1915 .....	885,471
	1916 .....	1,231,867
	1917 .....	3,660,054
	1918 .....	1,632,228

The way in which the sinkings were reduced is shown more clearly in the month-by-month totals for 1917 and 1918 :—

1917	January	153,899 gross tons sunk		
	February	310,868	”	”
	March	352,344	”	”
	April	526,447	”	”
	May	345,293	”	”
	June	398,773	”	”
	July	359,539	”	”
	August	331,370	”	”
	September	186,647	”	”
	October	261,873	”	”
	November	175,194	”	”
	December	257,807	”	”
1918	January	173,387	”	”
	February	213,045	”	”
	March	199,426	”	”
	April	214,426	”	”

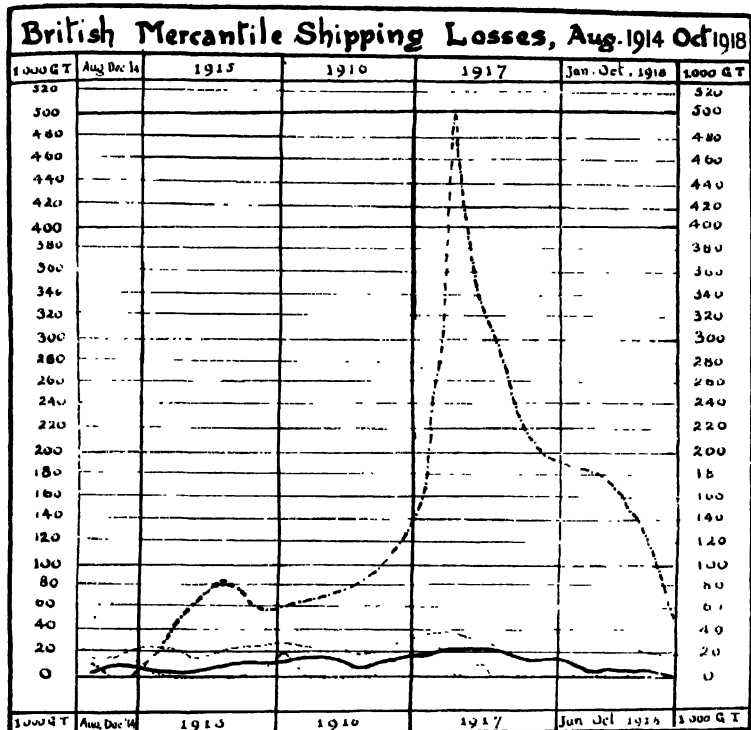


Chart showing British shipping losses.



## THE PERIL OF THE SUBMARINES 1193

1918	May	179,395	gross	tons	sunk
	June	143,639	"	"	"
	July	163,801	"	"	"
	August	143,944	"	"	"
	September	129,483	"	"	"
	October	56,330	"	"	"
	November	15,352	"	"	"

Against this record of our decreasing losses can be set the swelling figures for our new construction. The gross tonnage of the British Merchant vessels launched during the War period was as follows :—

*Growth of  
British  
shipbuilding*

### *Vessels Launched of 100 G.T. and upwards.*

1914	..	..	..	1,706,000	gross	tons
1915	..	..	..	664,000	"	"
1916	..	..	..	630,000	"	"
1917	..	..	..	1,229,000	"	"
1918	..	..	..	1,579,000	"	"

Up to the date of the initiation of the convoy the sinkings mounted upwards month by month. As the Germans were increasing the numbers of their more powerful submarines week by week and the long hours of daylight were approaching, there was every reason to apprehend an alarming increase in the rate of destruction of our merchant ships. Instead of that, there was a welcome drop in the casualties at sea ; at last the losses were confined to a figure which was about equal to the new tonnage launched from our yards.

British shipbuilding by the end of the War had almost levelled up to the rate at which the submarines were sinking our vessels ; the world

shipbuilding, including the big output of the United States, had in fact greatly surpassed that rate. Further, the new arrangements made for securing better use of our shipping were beginning to tell, and this reorganisation of our transport caused our shipping to be more effective than the figures for our net balance of available tonnage might imply. Our monthly average of imports during the last half-year of 1917 was 2,968,000 tons a month. During the period July-October, 1918, with a considerably smaller volume of shipping, the average was 3,002,000 tons a month. The story of how this effective use of our tonnage was organised is told in my chapter on the Ministry of Shipping.

It was Britain's grandest struggle on the seas—in its magnitude—in its intensity—in the issues that depended upon it. There were thousands of ships engaged in it, from the great battleships down to the smallest patrol boats—from the stately liners to the dogged tramps and the plucky little trawlers. Even the pleasure boats joined in. The battle was fought in every ocean, and on every trade route. Never were the skill, the daring and the endurance of British sailors put to so stern a test ; never was the superiority of their seamanship so triumphantly established. The deadly net that sought to envelop the Allied arms and leave them at the mercy of the Prussian sword was torn to shreds by the mariners of Britain.

The greatest Allied triumph of 1917 was the gradual beating off of the submarine attack. This was the real decision of the War, for the sea front *Conquest of the submarine ; our crucial triumph* ; turned out to be the decisive flank in the gigantic battlefield. Here victory rested with the Allies, or rather with Britain. The moment the War became a struggle, not to beat

the foe in a fight, but first to exhaust his strength and then to beat his defences down, the sea became inevitably the determining factor. If Germany was to be weakened it must be in one of two ways : (1) the growing weakness of her Allies ; (2) the effect of the blockade on the morale of her people. As far as the first method was concerned, she was using it effectively against us. It was our Allies who were being broken up one by one. But as for the second, whilst she was delivering savage body blows to our Allies which successively knocked four of them out, the grim fingers of the British Navy were tightening around her throat. What mattered most for us on land was that our Army should not let go when it was being battered, until the time came for it to deliver the final punch at its enfeebled opponent.

The repulse of the Allied attacks on the Somme, the Chemin des Dames and the Flanders coast did not bring ultimate victory to Germany. *Effect of the British blockade on Germany* Nor did the defeat of Russia and Roumania. But the frustration of the German effort to destroy the Allied shipping led straight to her ultimate collapse in 1918. Germany's supreme effort to blockade Britain had practically failed by the end of 1917 owing to the growing success of our efforts to protect our shipping, to the increase in our output of new ships, to the better use we were making of our shipping, and to the plans we had put through for adding to the yield of our own soil. The Allied losses were still heavy, but by the end of 1917 we knew that the German effort to blockade us would not succeed. On the other hand, our blockade was gradually breaking down the morale of the German nation. They were not starving, but they were already short of some of the essentials of

nutriment. Many comforts and most luxuries had become scarce. Even the soldiers in the field were beginning to feel the effect of our blockade. Their ration was already inferior to that of the men they fought. On land, the Central Powers had the advantage in the campaign of 1917. But they achieved nothing which would bring them final victory. They were beaten at sea and that was decisive. The only chance the Allies ever had of bringing the War to a successful conclusion on land was by breaking up Austria and thus isolating Germany. Failing that, all the Allies had to do was just to hold on until the blockade had completed its terrible work and until the Americans rushed up to help in the final overthrowing of a debilitated enemy. General Pétain was the first General to understand the Allied problem.

*A successful  
beleaguering*

Whilst the naval blockade was gradually effecting its deadly purpose, the Allies on land had two supreme tasks. One was to hold the Germans on the Western Front, the other to organise on the Eastern Front resistance which would prevent the Central Powers from breaking through to the granaries and oil stores of Russia. The Central Powers were beleaguered. We had to beat off their sorties until the exhaustion of their supplies forced them to surrender. That was the true significance of the virtual failure of the German submarine campaign.



## CHAPTER XLI

### THE ARMING OF MERCHANT VESSELS

THE carrying of guns during wartime by merchantmen engaged in commerce is a very old practice.

*An old tradition* Indeed, formerly it was usual for large ships to carry guns in times of peace, as a protection against pirates. In the Napoleonic wars, most British ships carried guns to defend themselves against French privateers, which took the seas as commerce raiders in considerable numbers after the defeat of Trafalgar had finally crushed the naval power of France.

During the Great War, the practice of putting guns on merchant ships was only gradually developed. We were short of guns for our fighting forces. The Admiralty began with the arming of some of the vessels engaged on more important work such as bringing of supplies from America, and in the course of 1915, the provision of guns for merchantmen was steadily developed, so far as guns were available. But the heavy demands of the Army for guns left the supply for shipping very scanty, and as German air-raids developed, the provision of anti-aircraft guns was given priority over other claims for the smaller types of gun. The guns supplied to the merchant ships were mostly of a type which the Army in the field could best spare.

By the autumn of 1916 a considerable number of vessels on the more dangerous routes had been supplied with guns.

*Slow progress  
in providing  
guns*

On 1st January, 1917, only 1,337 of our merchantmen carried guns.

The Official History records that "During the campaign of 1915, no merchant ships with a defensive armament had been sunk by German submarines ; and, up to August, 1916, the number destroyed, though steady, was quite small." In the summer of 1916 the Germans began launching their big submarines. In the autumn of the year, figures showed that the U-boat commanders were beginning to overcome the difficulties they experienced in attacking armed merchant vessels : "Twelve defensively armed merchantmen were sunk in December, 1916 and in January, 1917, the number had risen to twenty. It was true that of the merchantmen which escaped, nine out of ten did so by virtue of their gunfire. . . ."

*Diminishing  
value of  
small guns*

In the autumn of 1916 the position was that defensive arming of merchantmen had proved itself very useful against gunfire attacks by the older U-boats. The big submarines, however, which the Germans were now beginning to use could outrange the little guns hitherto supplied to merchant ships. And far too few of our ships were carrying any armament at all.

In the spring of 1916 there had been some slight risk of trouble with America over the arming of merchantmen. On January 18th, President Wilson, with the best of intentions for mitigating the horrors of submarine warfare, had issued one of his Notes, proposing to bring this form of war "within the rules

*President  
Wilson objects  
to arming of  
merchantmen*

of International Law and the principles of humanity." Submarines were not to sink ships without ensuring that all on board were removed to a place of safety, nor to attack them unless they tried to escape or resist. Ships, on the other hand, were to stop and yield if challenged by a submarine, and for this purpose must cease to be armed. He even hinted that America might decide to treat all merchantmen with guns on board as auxiliary cruisers, liable to internment. But this Note was not acceptable in Britain, and had a very mixed reception in the States, where Senators Lodge and Sterling warmly maintained the right of merchantmen to arm for defence, as an established usage of the sea. So the threat of American objection to the arming of merchant ships was dropped, and any fear of its revival disappeared when in March, 1916, the U-boat 29 torpedoed without warning the passenger vessel *Sussex* with 380 passengers aboard, including several American citizens.

The rapid rise in the sinking of merchantmen by U-boats in the late autumn of 1916 roused the War Committee to give its attention to the question of hurrying on the defensive arming of our ships. An alarmist letter from Sir John Jellicoe to the Premier played an important part in bringing up the issue. At their meeting of 31st October, 1916, the War Committee decided to review the whole question two days later with Jellicoe in person, and meantime asked the Admiralty to furnish them "with statistical information regarding the rate of loss from attacks by submarines, and the rate at which measures of defence against submarine attack, particularly guns for use in merchant ships, are being provided."

At the meeting of the War Committee on

2nd November, 1916, at which Admiral Jellicoe was present, it was reported that :—

“ The War Committee are of opinion that the protection of shipping and the maintenance of our tonnage is one of the gravest questions at present confronting the Allies. . . .

*Interview with War Committee* Admiral Sir John Jellicoe was in complete agreement with the Board of Admiralty that, whatever might be done in the future in the direction of fresh inventions, the defensive arming of merchant ships provides, at present, the most effective means of protecting merchant ships against submarines, as is clear from the statistics supplied to the War Committee.

*3,000 guns wanted* The War Committee were informed by the representatives of the Admiralty that 3,000 guns, 12-pounder size and upwards, preferably four-inch are required.

This estimate is made after allowing for ships engaged on distant voyages to call at some convenient port to land or embark their armament, according as they are leaving or entering the danger zone. 500 guns are on order in America, and some 240 are being obtained from Japan, but at present delivery is only taking place at the rate of eighty guns a month.”

At that rate half our mercantile marine might be sunk before the other half was armed.

*Inter-Departmental Conference summoned* It was decided that a conference should be held at an early date between experts from the Munitions Ministry and the Admiralty on the subject, as the War Committee

considered that the increased production of these guns was a question of the first importance.

As a result of this Inter-Departmental Conference it was recommended that the arming of merchant ships should be entrusted to the Admiralty, the War Office and Ministry of Munitions, the responsibility for initiating action to rest with the Admiralty.

On November 13th another meeting of the War Committee decided :—

“ Having regard, first, to the fact that the power of the Allies to continue the War would be materially diminished by continued losses of merchant ships, and second, to the accumulating evidence of the value of guns as a defence for merchant ships against submarine attack, the War Committee decided that, AS A QUESTION OF PRINCIPLE, the arming of merchant ships up to a number considered by the Admiralty as indispensable should be a first charge on our artillery resources.”

*A principle  
established*

No immediate action seems to have been taken to carry this decision beyond the establishment of the principle.

Less than four weeks after this Committee, the Second Coalition Government was formed. A fresh energy was infused into the work of arming merchantmen. Lord Jellicoe says in his book, “ The Crisis of the Naval War ” :—

“ The *defensive arming* of merchant ships was a matter which was pressed forward with great energy and rapidity during the year 1917. The matter was taken up with the Cabinet immediately

on the formation of the Board of Admiralty presided over by Sir Edward Carson, and arrangements made for obtaining a considerable number of guns from the War Office, from Japan, and from France, besides surrendering some guns from the secondary and anti-torpedo boat armament of our own men-of-war, principally those of the older type, pending the manufacture of large numbers of guns for the purpose. . . .”

*Prompt  
measures  
of new  
Government*

*Army guns  
diverted to  
shipping*

Soon after the formation of my Ministry it was decided that the Army should be called upon to give up some of its manufacturing capacity in order to enable the Admiralty to provide some hundreds of four-inch guns and howitzers for the Navy, and as even this provision did not meet the requirements it would be advisable that the Minister of Munitions should be authorised to provide further manufacturing facilities. As the manufacture of these new guns would take time, and the need was urgent, the army agreed to hand over at once to the Admiralty a considerable number of 15 pounders and 4.7 guns.

Arrangements were approved for suspending the manufacture of 724 guns and howitzers for the Army in order to produce a larger number of four-inch guns for arming merchantmen, and the War Office, Admiralty and Ministry of Munitions were ordered to prepare without delay a scheme for meeting the requirements of the Admiralty for guns for merchantmen by April, 1917. This decision is very significant of the fact that the War Cabinet at that date placed the maritime position first in the order of urgency.

These three Departments met on the same day, and on 29th December, they laid before the War Cabinet a series of proposals for providing the guns wanted, and arrangements were agreed for carrying out most of these plans.

We also took in hand immediately the question of not merely arming our merchant ships but of providing those already armed with guns of *Bigger and better guns* a longer range. As I have already stated, this question was raised by Admiral Jellicoe at the War Committee held in November, 1916, and it was then reported by the representatives of the Admiralty that 3,000 guns, 12-pounder size and upwards, preferably four-inch were required. But the guns that had been ordered for the purpose were only being delivered at the rate of 80 a month. This was obviously inadequate and much greater drive had to be put into the supply of the heavier and the longer range type of gun for our merchant ships.

The progress achieved by these measures in the arming of merchantmen can be briefly indicated by the following figures :—

From the outbreak of the Great War until the 9th December, 1916, the date on which the first meeting of my new War Cabinet was held, the *Statistics of increase in armed ships* total number of merchant vessels that had been armed was 1,195. By 1st January, 1917, this number had been increased to 1,420 (of which 83 had been lost). The quarterly increases during 1917 were as follows :—

Number of British Merchant Ships armed with guns [excluding howitzers].	
January 1, 1917	.. 1,420

April 1, 1917	.. ..	2,181*
July 1, 1917	.. ..	3,001
October 1, 1917	.. ..	3,763
January 1, 1918	.. ..	4,407

Quite a considerable number of howitzers were also made available for the equipment of the larger steamers. Thus within a year the number of vessels armed was more than trebled and the power of the armament provided was considerably increased. This process gave the convoys greater security by increasing the risks the submarine had to take in its attacks on our shipping.

\* From this date many of the guns were of a heavier type in order to cope with the more powerful ones with which the great cruiser submarines were equipped. Several vessels already armed had to be re-armed for this reason.



## CHAPTER XLII

### ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MINISTRY OF SHIPPING

WHEN the War broke out, Britain occupied a position of overwhelming superiority in the sphere of mercantile shipping. At the beginning of 1914, nearly 40,000 vessels of all kinds flew the British flag. That figure of course included a very large number of small craft—fishing boats, trawlers, drifters, tugs, lighters—which proved to be not without their crucial value in the War. But of steam vessels of over 100 tons there were 10,123 on the registers of Britain and her Dominions, with a total gross tonnage of 20½ million tons. Not far short of one-half of the shipping tonnage in the world was British.

Step by step, as the War developed, as the commitments of the British Government for equipping and reinforcing our armies overseas grew heavier, as the imports of stores to this country for Government purposes increased in volume, as the demands of our Allies for shipping tonnage became heavier, as the inroads of the German U-boat campaign diminished the available tonnage, and as the output of mercantile vessels from our shipbuilding yards dropped, the control by the Government over British shipping was extended, and the need for co-ordinating the various controls and forming a Department for administrative purposes became imperative.

In the early days, most of the work carried out by the Government in respect of British shipping, fell to the Admiralty. The Transport Department of the Admiralty was responsible for chartering the vessels necessary to carry our forces to France, Egypt and subsequently the Dardanelles and other theatres of war in Asia and East Africa, and to maintain them with food, munitions, and reinforcements. The developments of naval warfare also involved a very extensive requisitioning of small craft to act as auxiliaries to the Fleet—for patrol work, minesweeping and message-carrying. Some 1,720 yachts, trawlers, drifters, and motor-boats were secured as auxiliaries for use in home waters within the first ten months of the War. In addition, a number of merchant vessels were converted into armed merchant cruisers.

It must also be pointed out that although Britain owned so large a share of the world's shipping, this country did so much sea carriage for other countries that when the War broke out her shipping was not sufficient to meet our own home needs. A third of the merchant trade done with this country was in goods carried in foreign vessels. Of the imports which reached us in 1913, only 65 per cent. were brought in British bottoms. The shipping problem was thus accentuated on two sides.

Let us examine first of all the vastly increased demands on shipping, owing to the War. There was the immense and continually growing task of transporting men, animals, stores of all kinds from this country to the various fields of war. Like most other services, those of the Army Sea Transport grew beyond all

*Early  
measures of the  
Admiralty*

*War tasks  
of British  
shipping*

calculation. By the end of the year 1914, 946,000 men had been transported to and fro between the United Kingdom and overseas destinations. By the end of 1915, this figure had grown to over 4,000,000 ; by the end of 1916, to 9,000,000 ; by the end of 1917, to 16,000,000, and by the date of the Armistice to about 24,000,000. During the actual period of the War and till November, 1920, the troops and personnel transported to and from all the fighting fronts, including France, Gallipoli, Egypt, Mesopotamia, etc., from and to Great Britain, India and the Dominions and Colonies, amounted to 28,719,315. The total numbers in fact were as follows :—

Troops and personnel .. ..	28,719,315
Sick and wounded .. ..	3,221,992
Nursing sisters and civilians	929,521
Refugees .. .. .	133,510
Prisoners .. .. .	336,398
	<hr/>
TOTAL NUMBERS MOVED	33,340,736
	<hr/>
Horses, mules, etc... ..	2,400,654
Vehicles .. .. .	553,829

To this enormous total must be added the stores and equipment moved for the troops. Up to the Armistice, some 49,000,000 tons by weight, equal to about 122,000,000 shipping tons, were carried. During the later stages of the War, the army stores sent daily to France alone mounted to 90,000 tons.

It is interesting to note how various were the shipments for army account. Camels, for example, were shipped in large numbers. One rather curious shipment was carried out for political purposes arising

from our military operations. This was the provision of a vessel to convey the "Holy Carpet" and Moslem pilgrims to Jeddah for their annual pilgrimage to Mecca. The only ship which was at the moment readily available was an ex-German steamer. It was thought inadvisable to use a ship with a German name; so the vessel's name was solemnly changed for the occasion. Nothing untoward happened as a result of the change of name. Thus a superstition of the seas was confuted.

*Carrying the "Holy Carpet"*

A further task for our shipping imposed by the War was that of bringing from abroad the raw materials for the manufacture of munitions and equipment. We also had the task of supplying our Allies by means of sea transport, both with munitions and raw materials for their manufacture, and with many articles of civil use which they had formerly been able to obtain overland from countries now at war with them, or in the case of France, from their own provinces now held by the enemy. Most of the coal and iron mines of France were in the hands of the enemy, and most of her coal and ore had therefore to be carried across the seas. France had the equivalent of over one million tons gross of British shipping set aside exclusively for her services, and 43 per cent. of her total imports were carried in British ships. Of her coal imports, 50 per cent. or 1,600,000 tons a month, was carried by British ships, and the bulk of her cereals. In addition, by our practice of refusing bunker coal to vessels not serving the Allied cause, we forced over 400,000 tons gross of neutral tonnage into her service.

*Materials for munitions and for Allies*

Italy was during the War period deprived of supplies of coal and other commodities which she formerly

derived from German and Austrian sources. The deficiency had to be made up by sea-carried supplies from Britain. Italy had during the War over half a million tons gross of British shipping set aside for supplying her needs. About 45 per cent. of her total imports, and 75 per cent. of her coal supplies were carried to her in British ships. And 300,000 tons gross of neutral tonnage was reserved for her service by us through the exercise of our control over bunker supplies.

While our shipping was thus called on to bear a wide range of additional burdens, the War led to a considerable restriction of the available tonnage. The German Mercantile Marine, the second largest in the world, was bottled up in Germany, or, where it had not been captured by us, interned in neutral harbours. Enemy action by submarines, mines and surface raiders, was steadily cutting down the total of available shipping, both Allied and neutral. Shipbuilding, owing to the need for turning the energies of our yards to naval demands, fell heavily, and the Board of Trade did not take steps in time to safeguard the interests of mercantile shipbuilding by checking the recruitment of skilled workers and by reserving a fair share of the berths in the yards for merchant ships. Moreover, whilst the demand for shipping increased and the number of available ships diminished without prospect of replenishment, the ships that were left could not make as many voyages as usual owing to War conditions. The necessity of precautionary measures to avoid danger zones, which led to devious routing and to the continual holding-up of vessels when a raider or submarine was believed to be operating in the neighbourhood, had the result of making voyages take much longer, so that the services which

*Reduction of  
available world  
tonnage*

a given volume of shipping could render in a given time were heavily reduced. There was also a great deal of congestion on the railways and ports which delayed the loading and unloading of ships. Much of that congestion was inevitable, but much of it could have been avoided by businesslike supervision and control.

With the problems which resulted from this growing strain upon our shipping resources I was not myself departmentally concerned during the early part of the War. The one important measure for which I had some responsibility was the scheme of War Risks Insurance which was brought into force at the beginning of August, 1914.

This was one of those financial arrangements with which, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, I was closely occupied during the days immediately preceding and following the outbreak of the War, and of which I have given some account in the first volume of these *War Risks Insurance* Memoirs. The history of the War Risks Insurance Scheme can be briefly outlined in a few words. For some time past the Huth Jackson Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence had been at work upon a scheme for maintaining the shipping services of this country in the event of war by providing State assistance for the underwriting of the special war risks which would arise. Their important task had been completed shortly before the crisis arose. When the Great War threatened, there were immediate signs of panic among shipowners and underwriters. On 30th July, 1914, chartering ceased at North American ports, vessels already loaded with grain being held up owing to the impossibility of insuring except at prohibitive rates, and there

appeared a danger that the whole of our import and export trade, vital to maintain our supplies of food and raw materials, might be paralysed.

Urgent representations were made to me as Chancellor of the Exchequer, since the matter was one which could only be remedied by the Government carrying the risk for War losses. As

*My part in  
decision to  
adopt scheme*

with the cognate questions of credit and finance, which were then deeply pre-occupying me, it was a matter of taking State action to restore confidence. So I took steps to have the issue promptly investigated, and a meeting took place around my breakfast table at 11, Downing Street, on Saturday, 1st August, 1914, at which the Ministers and officials most closely concerned were present. Our discussions proving inconclusive, I proceeded to secure the summoning of a special Committee of the Cabinet, to which were invited the late Mr. Huth Jackson and Sir Raymond Beck—two of the leading experts who had been engaged on the question—to expound their views on the situation and on the measures necessary to deal with it. This Committee was held the same day, and debated till nearly midnight without coming to any agreement. It was obviously impossible to leave our shipping hanging on a dead centre whilst politicians wrangled about the ideal nature and extent of State action to set it moving again. I therefore decided that the only possible course was to recommend to the Government the adoption as it stood of the detailed scheme already prepared by the Huth Jackson Sub-Committee. For an imperative need, better an imperfect plan than none at all.

The whole of Sunday was occupied in working out the administrative and other measures for applying

the scheme. On Sunday night the War Risks Association of Shipowners were informed of the decision of the Government and invited to submit the proposals to their members. *Scheme put into effect* On Monday the Board of Trade took provisional action to furnish cover for the hulls of the vessels held up by war peril. On Tuesday, 4th August, I explained to the House of Commons what had been done and the reasons for our actions, and the scheme was adopted by Parliament and by the shipowners' associations. On the 5th, the first day we were at war, the State Cargo Insurance Office was opened in the public halls of the Cannon Street Hotel by officials of the Board of Trade with the co-operation of the underwriters. Our shipping began to move everywhere and my own immediate concern with this problem was for the time ended.

During the following months, the Departments directly in touch with the shipping situation were those of the Admiralty, War Office, and Board of Trade. *Growing demands of Transport Department* The biggest single factor in our problem was the great and growing number of vessels that were being requisitioned by the Transport Department for special war services, and thus withdrawn from general shipping services. By January, 1915, between 1,100 and 1,200 steamships had thus been diverted from their normal employment. Later on, when the Ministry of Munitions had been set up and begun to function actively, its extensive requirements in the shape of imports of raw materials for National Controlled Factories, and of munitions ordered in America, distracted further vessels from general trade.

By degrees the responsibility of the Government for the control of shipping was perforce extended.



Early in 1916 the Departments concerned with sea transport found themselves in a difficulty owing to the growing shortage of tonnage available to meet growing demands.

On 27th January, 1916, the Cabinet set up the Shipping Control Committee, under the Chairmanship of Lord Curzon. This was the first body entrusted with the task of surveying the tonnage situation as a whole. Its main activities were directed to :—

*The Shipping  
Control  
Committee*

Securing economy in the use of tonnage on naval and military service ;

Setting a limit to the amount of tonnage supplied to the Allies, whose demands had hitherto been granted as a matter of course ;

Import restrictions ;

Port congestion ;

Shipbuilding.

No effective—certainly no adequate—action was taken for over ten months after the appointment of the Committee to achieve any of these aims.

On 10th February, 1916, this Committee presented to Mr. Runciman, the President of the Board of

Trade, a Report which showed that whereas the total demands on shipping not as yet requisitioned for war service would require 10,328,000 gross tons of shipping to carry out, the actual tonnage of shipping available for the purpose was only 7,068,803 tons—a deficit of over  $3\frac{1}{4}$  million tons. This was after making allowance for the possible services of foreign shipping which we might be able to obtain. The Committee accordingly stated that “ the situation is

*Restriction  
of imports  
recommended*

exceedingly grave and calls for immediate and drastic action." They recommended that non-essential imports should be prohibited. "Expressed in terms of tons weight of imports, a deficiency of  $3\frac{1}{4}$  million gross tons of shipping means a deficiency of 13 million tons weight of imports, so that . . . the weight of imports . . . must be reduced by more than 25 per cent." The shortage thus envisaged constituted a problem of urgent gravity. We shall however see in the chapter on Imports how utterly we failed to comply with the proposals sketched out by this Committee for dealing with this acute and intensifying crisis by effecting a drastic reduction in our imports.

In the ten months January-October, 1916, the total merchant shipping lost through enemy action (mainly sunk by submarines) was 1,638,460 tons, including Allied and Neutral shipping. Of British shipping alone it was 877,413 tons. And the rate of sinking had begun to mount swiftly with the irruption of the cruiser submarine. It was clear that unless something could be done, and done quickly, to effect a fundamental change in the position, we could not make such a contribution to the War as would enable the Alliance to continue with any hope of success.

Throughout 1916 Mr. Runciman talked in terms of unmitigated pessimism and placed a near limit on the possibility of our continuing the struggle—owing to lack of ships. The Board of Trade declared that: "We have exhausted every civil economy suggested to us or thought of by our experts or by members of the Government and the Departments." Unless, therefore, measures were taken to improve the position by grappling effectively with the

*Pessimism at  
the Board  
of Trade*

submarine menace, by building more ships, and by making the best use of the ships that were left, then the sooner we made tracks for peace the better. That accounted in great measure for the Lansdowne move for immediate peace negotiations. Lord Lansdowne quoted Mr. Runciman's gloomy forecasts in the prelude to his memorandum of November, 1916 (which has been referred to in a previous volume). Mr. Runciman's prognostications were based on figures which he might have amended by strong and timely action.

In the first week of November, 1916, Mr. Runciman gave to the War Committee a particularly depressing account of the shipping outlook. He subsequently discovered, however, that there were depths of dejection several stages beneath those into which he had plunged us at this meeting. So a few days later he still further darkened the colouring of his picture by warning us that the record of the previous meeting had not been as explicit as he would wish on the gravity of the merchant shipping situation. *His experts had told him that he had been too sanguine in saying that there would be a breakdown of shipping by June, 1917. They considered that the breakdown would come before that time.* He called attention in particular to the demand for additional raw material to the extent of 2,500,000 tons by the Ministry of Munitions.

*Mr. Runci-  
man's  
forebodings*

This demand, he said, had been reduced by half. He also drew attention to the difficulties of the Wheat Commission, who were at present unable to find the 40 vessels they required to bring wheat from Australia. They had gone into the neutral market, but had only been able to obtain two ships at reasonable prices. Another neutral ship had been offered at

the huge price of 380s. a ton, and this sum would have to be paid. Thus they were nearly 40 ships short on their first allotment.

Further on in the course of our discussions he also pointed out that the balance received from premiums both on ships and cargoes under the Government War Risks Insurance scheme had now for the first time entirely disappeared.

When he came to shipbuilding, he said the situation here was a good deal worse than he had thought. There was no steel available for shipbuilding even on the existing reduced basis.

It is recorded that after the Committee had been drenched with these cumulative jeremiads, I said that "the situation was very serious, and required to be dealt with on broader lines" than those which had been indicated by the President of the Board of Trade. I put forward proposals as to the development of steel production in U.S.A. and Canada, and as to stopping the export of engines.

But the most important proposal I made was : "To appoint a Director of Merchant Shipping under the President of the Board of Trade, with full powers to organise—

*A Director  
of Merchant  
Shipping  
needed*

(a) The merchant shipping available to the best advantage to this country.

(b) The building of additional ships in this country and America.

I ended by saying that "in my opinion some such drastic measures as these were absolutely necessary, and any minor suggestions were mere tinkering."

Now that the War had been manœuvred by the Military Command into a pure war of exhaustion, I felt that our shipping had become the most vital and vulnerable point in the issue of victory or defeat. I was convinced that much more was needed than could be done by the Admiralty and the Board of Trade, separately and in combination, to save us from the desperate position into which we were rapidly drifting through lack of initiative, grasp, and vigour. I thought the handling of our shipping tonnage was so important a matter, involving such unremitting attention to detail in the way of organising voyages, controlling the ports, building new ships, that it was a one-man job, and a task which would absorb the concentrated mind of a whole department, directed and manned by those who had practical experience in the management of our mercantile marine.

With regard to my first two proposals, the President of the Board of Trade said in substance that what I suggested either had been done or could not be done. On the proposition that I put forward about a Shipping Controller, “he had already decided to ask two of the greatest shipping experts of the day *to assist him and take off his shoulders some of the very heavy work connected with shipping.* And AS TIME WENT ON *he hoped to be able to delegate more and more responsibility to them.*” It was all very leisurely. If shipping resources were already inadequate for essential war services and now likely to break down entirely before June—and the Admiralty vowed they could not see how to stop our enormous losses—every hour was precious as blood to a man whose wounds cannot be staunched.

It was also pointed out, in opposition to my

proposal, that there was Lord Curzon's Committee on Shipping Control. But it was admitted "that there was no special body outside the Board of Trade for dealing with the building of additional ships in this country and in America."

I explained in reply that I was aware of the splendid work of the Shipping Control Committee, and that it would be necessary for this Committee to continue its work under my scheme in order to assist the Director of Shipping, but the latter would have complete executive authority to an extent not vested in any one person at present. *Relation of Shipping Controller to Lord Curzon's Committee* I urged that no Committee could satisfactorily discharge executive functions, and that although I had every confidence in the capacity and energy of the chairman, he could not possibly find time for superintending both ships and our air service, each of these demanding the full energies of one man. I pointed out that the present system had not prevented the probability, according to the President of the Board of Trade, of a threatened breakdown next summer.

As success or failure in the War depended upon the maintenance of a sea transport equal to the essential needs of the Allies, I repeatedly urged the Prime Minister and the War Committee to set up a Ministry of Shipping with a Shipping Controller at its head, to deal with this vital problem. The Board of Trade resisted this diminution of its authority, and the Prime Minister's well-known dislike for kicking along laggard colleagues with academic qualifications was growing on him. He always postponed the operation if it was suggested to him that a less drastic remedy would cure the evil. So the time went by, carrying with it every week

a mournful diminution in our resources of sea transport.

Nothing was done during the lifetime of the First Coalition Government to establish a thorough and efficient reorganisation and control of our shipping. This problem was therefore left, amongst other embarrassing inheritances, for the new Government to grapple with.

*Problem left  
to the new  
Government*

I knew it was a whole-time job for a man of practical experience and tried capacity. So pressing did I consider the shipping situation that, as soon as I was invited by the King to form a Government, without even waiting until the principal offices were filled, I invited Sir Joseph Maclay, a well-known Glasgow shipowner of high repute, to take the office of Shipping Controller—a selection which was strongly supported by Mr. Bonar Law. I had never met him, but as Mr. Bonar Law knew him well and had the highest opinion of his capacity and character, I rang Maclay up at his Glasgow office on my first day as Prime Minister. The line was so bad that I could not hear a word he said, so I invited him to come up and see me in London. He travelled up that night and met me the following morning at the War Office—(I had not yet left this office for Downing Street)—and I asked him if he would accept the post of Shipping Controller.

*Sir Joseph  
Maclay accepts  
the new  
Ministry*

With characteristic modesty Sir Joseph Maclay declined, telling me that in his opinion a man of wider experience and influence should be secured for the position. It required the joint persuasion of Mr. Bonar Law and myself to wring from him a reluctant consent. We had every reason to be proud of the pressure we exerted on the occasion, for no

minister ever served his country more effectively in an emergency. The following morning, 9th December, 1916, I informed the War Cabinet at its first meeting that Sir Joseph Maclay was to be appointed Shipping Controller. Until the Shipping Ministry received legislative sanction, he was to take the Presidency of the Shipping Control Committee, but he was to have extended powers, as to which he would himself report after examination.

The War Cabinet directed their Secretary to invite the Admiralty and the Board of Trade to give Sir Joseph Maclay every possible facility and assistance.

The new Ministry was in due course legally authorised by the new Ministries and Secretaries Act, 1916, which received the Royal Assent

*Prompt action taken* on 22nd December. But the new Minister of Shipping did not wait for that event.

Although on leaving me after accepting the appointment, as he has since confessed to me, "one of the most miserable men in London," he called two leading shipbuilders into conference that same afternoon at his hotel, and arranged with them for an immediate meeting of the Shipbuilders' Association, so that the building of more ships might be pressed on with at once, as the most outstanding need of the country. He also got promptly into touch with the Shipping Control Committee, which was being superseded by the new Ministry. Lord Curzon, its former Chairman, was in any case resigning to join my new War Cabinet, and another member, Lord Farrington, also withdrew. But the other three members, Sir Thomas Royden, Sir Kenneth Anderson and Mr. Frederick Lewis, three of the ablest shipowners in the world, agreed to





*(Photo: Russell)*

The Rt. Hon. Lord Maclay.



co-operate with Maclay in forming a new Shipping Committee, and thereafter, worked with him closely and with conspicuous loyalty, giving their whole time to the task.

As it was necessary that the Shipping Controller and his staff should be in close and constant touch with the Naval Departments, the Ministry of Shipping was eventually housed in new buildings which were rapidly run up on the only available site near the Admiralty —the lake in St. James's Park, which was drained for the purpose, and transformed into a row of grey, two-storied concrete buildings. Pending the construction of his new quarters, Sir Joseph Maclay was given a room in the Admiralty buildings. Hitherto the Admiralty had exercised a considerable measure of control over sea transport, and the new Ministry was thus relieving them of a very heavy and increasingly difficult task which lay strictly outside their ordinary routine, and for the handling of which they did not possess the appropriate commercial and industrial experience.

Yet here again, as with the War Office when the Ministry of Munitions had been formed, there was little gratitude at the lightening of burdens they were unable to carry. Sir Joseph Maclay got no friendly reception from the Admiralty. He reported that his appointment was resented by them, and as a body they were not out to help.

He is not the kind of man to be deterred by a frosty reception from getting ahead promptly with a duty he has undertaken. Climate and experience had inured him to all weathers. In a few days he had planned a large increase in our shipbuilding output,

and in less than a week after his appointment he had secured the agreement of the Admiralty to a programme for constructing a number of tramp steamers of about 8,000 tons each, and came to the War Cabinet with a request for their authority to embark upon the scheme. This permission was immediately given, and at the same meeting (15th December, 1916) he was authorised to go ahead with a scheme he had prepared for purchasing some 77,500 tons of shipping from Japan. A week later, on 22nd December, 1916, the First Sea Lord reported that, according to information received that morning, the rate of output of merchant shipping for next year did not exceed 400,000 tons during the first six months, as compared with submarine losses amounting to about 300,000 tons a month.

The Shipping Controller, however, reported that he had information to the effect that, provided the necessary labour and material were available, an output of 1,000,000 tons deadweight capacity might be expected *during the first six months of next year (1917)*.

This included a large order given to the U.S.A. When the Americans came into the War all ships in course of construction in their yards were seized for their own use. The ships ordered by the Controller in American yards therefore were not added to our dwindling mercantile fleet. Nevertheless they diminished the sum total of Allied deficiency.

The new Ministry of Shipping took over from the Board of Trade the task of keeping watch on the construction of merchant shipbuilding, embarking in addition upon a programme of direct Government shipbuilding for the standard pattern of ships projected by the new Controller.

Shipbuilding remained in the hands of the Ministry of Shipping until May, 1917. During these five months, Sir Joseph Maclay greatly speeded up the completion of vessels already under construction, and devised a programme that would eventually yield upwards of 3,000,000 tons of merchant shipping a year. There was serious need for some such stimulus, for despite the inroads made by the submarines, our construction of merchant shipping had been falling off heavily since the outbreak of the War. In 1913 there had been completed 1,919,578 tons gross of merchant shipping. In 1915 the total was 688,629 tons, and in 1916 it fell still lower to 538,797 tons. Part of this decline had been due to the much greater output of war vessels and auxiliary craft for the Admiralty, but even after making allowance for this, the total gross tonnage of all kinds completed during these years had shown, too, a heavy falling off from the 1913 figure. During the first five months of 1917, from January to May, the merchant tonnage completed was 376,588 tons. The programme put in hand resulted in the completed tonnage for the whole of 1917 reaching the figure of 1,163,474 gross tons. This result was achieved in spite of the largely increased demands on our iron and steel supplies, as well as on our engineering resources, by the swelling needs of the Army and Navy.

Arrangements were also set on foot for extensive purchases of foreign shipping.

In addition to his efforts to increase our tonnage, the Shipping Controller set to work to organise the more effectual and economic use of the shipping we had. In January, 1917, out of a total of 3,731 passenger and cargo vessels of 1,600 gross tonnage

and upwards, flying the British flag, with a gross tonnage totalling 16,591,032 tons, there were 1,500 with a total gross tonnage of 7,082,099 tons not requisitioned by the Admiralty for war services, nor allocated for special purposes, such as supplying the Allies or bringing wheat to this country. The system was wasteful as far as the needs of the nation were concerned. It was grossly unfair as between the owners of requisitioned and unrequisitioned tonnage. The Ministry of Shipping had to see that not only were the requisitioned vessels being worked as efficiently as possible, but that all tonnage not as yet requisitioned was controlled and directed to the most serviceable purposes. To this end the Shipping Controller was given general powers of control over all British shipping. He proceeded to press for the release by the Admiralty of a proportion of the tonnage held by them, which on a careful inquiry he was convinced was being wastefully used. He insisted that 17½ per cent. of the tonnage so requisitioned should be released for carriage of goods, in particular of coal for the Allies. In this demand he received the support of the Cabinet. How promptly the new Controller acted will be seen from the fact that on 22nd December, 1916, it was reported to the War Cabinet that all but 20,000 tons of this percentage had then been released.

The next important step in this connection was taken on 9th February, 1917, when the War Cabinet considered a memorandum prepared by the Shipping Controller making a series of recommendations as to the powers he considered he should possess for the carrying out of his task. Perhaps the most important

*Problem of  
controlling  
mercantile  
tonnage*

*Maclay asks  
for extended  
powers*

item in this memorandum was the proposal that the Transport Department of the Admiralty, which was now charged with a multitude of duties in connection with the control and use of shipping, should be transferred to the Ministry of Shipping. This part of the memorandum ran as follows :—

“ Attention is called to the present anomalous position of the Transport Department. The Director of Transports is an Admiralty Officer responsible solely to the Board of Admiralty. His Department, however, in practice regulates the distribution of merchant shipping, not merely for Admiralty service, but also under requisition for War Office, Wheat Commission, and other Government services. So long as all Government demands could be met in full, or subject only to minor adjustment, this arrangement might work smoothly ; but, as soon as cutting down of requirements in one direction or another becomes necessary, difficulties are bound to arise, and the Director of Transports may find himself involved in a conflict of authority. It is believed that this point has now been reached. The pressure upon available tonnage is now such that it is necessary to weigh against each other the needs of the various Departments, including the Admiralty, and to determine in which direction priority should be given.”

This memorandum was originally drawn up by the Shipping Controller after consultation with me and submitted by him to the Admiralty on 12th January, 1917. The reasonableness of the proposal for the transfer to the Ministry of Shipping of the

Department holding control of merchant shipping was too obvious for dispute. But on the other hand the Lords of the Admiralty disliked the idea that a portion of their power should be alienated to another control, and they were horrified at the notion that brass buttons should be ordered about by bone. Sir Joseph Maclay appealed to the War Cabinet.

The fight was thus transferred to the chamber of the War Cabinet. The Lords of the Admiralty turned up in force to denounce the impiety of Sir Joseph Maclay's suggestion.

One of the Sea Lords wanted to know how it was possible for senior officers of the Admiralty engaged on transport to receive orders from a shipowner. But the War Cabinet decided, in spite of their objections, to approve the proposal of the Shipping Controller, adding thereto as a rider that if they so desired, the Admiralty could adopt a suggestion of the Director of Transports about keeping on their books the part of the staff dealing with Naval and Military shipping. So ended this naval engagement. The pirates won and the ships of the line withdrew from these particular waters. The control of our mercantile marine passed entirely from the Admiralty to the new Shipping Ministry. The Department of the Director of Transports and Shipping duly took up its quarters in the desiccated duck-pond of St. James's Park, under the humble roof of the new Ministry ; and despite the misgivings of the Admiralty chiefs, this arrangement turned out to be a complete success.

Another matter which engaged the early attention of the Shipping Controller was one as to which I had given an undertaking as soon as I took office,



namely, a more complete national control of the whole of our shipping. This, incidentally, involved the question of the profits earned by British ship-owners. Against these profits there had been a good deal of public outcry. As the demands on shipping grew, and the progress of requisitioning for Government work diminished the amount of tonnage available for general commerce, the competition of shippers all over the world had forced up freights to surprising heights. Thus at the end of

*Problem of high freights* 1913 the freight rate for grain from the Plate to the United Kingdom had been 12s. 6d. At the end of 1915 it was 115s.

and by the end of 1916 it had risen to 145s. Similarly, the rate for coal from Cardiff to Port Said, which at the end of 1913 had averaged 7s. 9d., rose to 62s. 6d. by the end of 1915 and to 80s. in 1916. The rates for carrying in requisitioned ships was fixed by the Government and restricted to a scale. As I have already pointed out, there was thus a grossly unfair discrimination in favour of those ships and shipowners who had successfully eluded requisition.

These high freights of course tended to force up prices—already only too much inclined to rise through other causes. And the public who were called upon to make sacrifices for the sake of their native land were angry when they became painfully aware that their necessities were getting dearer, largely owing to the rapacity of certain shipowners. There was no justification in war risks for these inflated rates. The Government insurance covered losses at sea, and wages had not increased to anything like that extent. The added risk to life did not extend to the owners. It was a scandalous example of war profiteering. Such was the state of things which drove me to the

announcement I made to the Labour Deputation that the new Government proposed to bring our shipping under Government control.

There was keen debate about the question whether or not the step should be taken of nationalising all shipping in the sense of transferring it from private ownership altogether. To this course the Shipping

Controller was opposed, deeming that *Maclay opposes the experienced shipowner, subject to an appropriate degree of control, and to excess profits duties or similar methods of diverting the major part of the proceeds of wartime freights into the Exchequer, would be the best person to manage the business side of the shipping. He set out his views in a letter which is not without its bearings on some of the controversies of to-day :—*

“ 2nd February, 1917.

Dear Prime Minister,

Since the discussion at the War Cabinet last week I have given earnest consideration to the question of the nationalisation of shipping, keeping in view your promises relative thereto.

I think you may justly consider shipping to be nationalised on the lines you aim at when you secure the absolute control of every ship of the British Mercantile Marine and deal with the profits exactly as you elect. Such is the case to-day.

Under the system of requisition and ship licensing, no British vessel can go on any voyage without direct authority from the Government, and the control is thus absolute.

Then with regard to profits, you can deal with these in various ways :—

1. You can give the average of two years before the War plus a percentage on all extra profit earned.

2. You can do as my memorandum suggested, and simply apply the existing machinery of the Excess Profits Tax, making the Exchequer proportion as high as you like.

3. You can give the average of two years before the War and anything more, or nothing.

4. You can deal with shipping on the exact lines of Controlled Establishments, which get the average of two years before the War plus 20 per cent.

My own mind is clear. I believe it is a mistake not to leave an incentive to men to exert themselves to the utmost, however trifling that incentive may be. In my opinion, the definitely fixed figure in Controlled Establishments is a blunder. There is absolutely no incentive to economy, and the results are just as might be expected. In many shops you get neither care of time nor of money, and the same applies very much to railway companies. I therefore specially recommend for your consideration either No. 1 or No. 2 of the above suggestions. Under either you take the two years' pre-War average as your basis, and by granting a percentage, however small, on all extra profit earned, you will secure the whole-hearted effort on the part of shipowners and their staffs, through whom we must continue to work.

I think no greater mistake could be made than by attempting to take over in any other way British shipping. You retain all the advantages of

*Value of the  
incentive of  
private profit*

the experience of practical men who know their business, and also, as far as possible all the elaborate system built up by private enterprise and pay nothing for it, and there is the further certainty that, after the War, owners will be able without loss of time, to resume their regular services.

Yours very truly,

J. P. MACLAY."

This letter was laid by me before the War Cabinet on 12th February, 1917, when we gave careful consideration to the question of shipowners' profits and the nationalising of shipping. I was committed to the extent of the pledge I had given to the House of Commons in my speech on 19th December, 1916, which was in the following terms :—

*" . . . the Government felt the time had come for taking over more complete control of all the ships of this country and placing them in practically the same position as are the railways of the country at this present moment ; so that during the War shipping will be nationalised in the real sense of the term. The prodigious profits which were made out of freights were contributing in no small measure to the high cost of commodities ; and I always found not only that, but that they were making it difficult for us in our task with labour. Whenever I met organised labour under any conditions where I would persuade them to give up privileges, I always had hurled at me phrases about the undue and extravagant profits of shipping. This is intolerable in wartime, when, so many are making so great sacrifices for the State."*

After some discussion, the War Cabinet decided upon the following course of action :—

(a) The Shipping Controller should extend the requisitioning of tonnage at Blue Book rates so as to make it general and as nearly as possible universal, and that the cases to which requisitioning did not apply were to be justified only by exceptional circumstances.

(b) The Shipping Controller should report to the War Cabinet weekly, or at regular intervals, the progress made in this matter.

(c) The profits should be dealt with in a manner corresponding, *mutatis mutandis*, to that adopted in the case of the railways, i.e., by assessing the profits by the average over a period of time preceding the War, and that the Shipping Controller should be asked to report to the War Cabinet as to the effect of taking for that purpose the average profits made during the two, three, four and five years, respectively, preceding the War.

These decisions brought practically the whole of our shipping under national control for the period of the War.

The Controller's report on the way these decisions had been carried out was considered by the Cabinet on 10th and 17th April. The Controller was able to report that practically all the mercantile fleet of the country was now under requisition at Blue Book rates, and after examining the figures for rates of shipping before the War, the Cabinet decided that :—

*Universal  
requisitioning  
carried out*

"The question of limiting profits should be settled by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Mr. Henderson, in consultation with the Shipping Controller, the decision to be reported to the War Cabinet at an early date."

An important development took place at the Admiralty in May, 1917, which had a direct influence upon the work of the Ministry of Shipping.

When I paid my visit to the Admiralty at the end of April to confer with the heads there as to measures to be taken to combat the submarine menace, I was told that the Navy could not work a convoy system properly because with all its immense fleet it had not

*Need for  
further naval  
construction*

sufficient craft to provide escorts. The excuse was neither adequate nor sincere, for armed trawlers served the purpose. But if it were true; then the task of increasing its resources for this purpose was one which clearly called for immediate supervision and direction by someone of energy and ability. I accordingly recommended to the War Cabinet that there should

*A controller  
of naval  
shipbuilding  
proposed*

be appointed, as a member of the Board of Admiralty, a business man to superintend the whole of the shipbuilding and supply of material for naval purposes.

This proposal was not acceptable to the Board. The Cabinet discussed it on 2nd May, 1917. The First Lord pointed out that such functions were already provided for in the duties assigned by Mr. Churchill to the Additional Civil Lord, although in fact those duties appear to have remained dormant. He stated that the First Sea Lord and himself were in complete agreement with regard to this recommendation, and were prepared to amplify, if necessary,

the scope of the duties assigned by Mr. Churchill to such an appointment. They laid stress, however, on the importance of the appointment of someone who had the complete confidence of the War Cabinet.

The War Cabinet considered that the best available man would have to be appointed to this post, and that, in view of the paramount importance of the shipping situation, nothing should stand in the way of this appointment. There was a general agreement that, having regard to his record in this War, Major-General Sir Eric Geddes would be the most suitable person if he were willing to undertake the duties. The War Cabinet saw Major-General Geddes and invited him to accept the appointment. He promised to consider the matter and to reply as soon as possible.

The War Cabinet also felt that, having regard to the intimate connection between shipbuilding for the purposes of the Royal Navy, the Mercantile Marine and the War Office Inland Waterways, there should be a very close association between the holder of the new Office and the shipbuilding side of the Shipping Controller's Committee, and a proposal was made that the new Admiralty Civil Lord should exercise a measure of control over all three departments, as far as they were engaged in shipping construction, after the general policy had been laid down by the War Cabinet.

Sir Eric Geddes consented to undertake this work. Accordingly, on 11th May, 1917, I was able to report his acquiescence, and he was duly appointed.

The War Cabinet decided that on account of his proposed other duties at the Admiralty in connection with supplies of armament, etc., and on account of the complexity of naval design, it was necessary that his touch with the Admiralty should be very close, and

it was therefore decided that he should be appointed one of the Lords of the Admiralty.

Sir Eric entered on the office of Controller of the Navy, and was given the rank of Vice-Admiral. He had discovered by bitter experience in

*An un-  
precedented  
appointment*

France what it meant for an un-uniformed functionary to order about men in uniform. That is why he had been given the rank of a General, for obedience to his orders then became automatic. One rather interesting departure from precedent was occasioned by this further appointment, for by arrangement with Sir Douglas Haig, Sir Eric continued for a couple of months longer in his connection with the transportation branch of the Army, and thus enjoyed the amphibious distinction of being at once both a General and an Admiral—an unprecedented attainment for a civilian.

*Merchant  
shipbuilding  
transferred to  
new Navy  
Controller*

In accordance with the War Cabinet's decision, the control of mercantile shipbuilding was also entrusted to him. It thus passed out of the care of the Ministry of Shipping. This was not due to any failure of the Ministry to deal energetically and successfully with that part of its task, but to the desirability of placing the whole of ship construction—naval and civil alike—under a single authority specially charged with this vitally important work.

Mention should be made of one important piece of work planned and carried out by the Ministry of Shipping to economise our tonnage in 1917, when losses from submarines were at their worst, when the convoy system had not yet got into working order and the big programmes of new shipping construction had not had time to bear fruit. This was a measure for a large concentration of our shipping in the Atlantic.



The scheme was worked out by Sir Leo Chiozza Money, with the aid of Sir Arthur Salter and Sir Norman Leslie. Briefly, they set themselves to consider how far we could supply our vital needs from countries near at hand, instead of from those which involved a sea voyage lasting twice and thrice as long. Obviously, the same volume of shipping could bring two or three times as much to us from a near as from a distant country in the same space of time. They came to the conclusion that nearly all our essential imports could be secured from the North American Continent, and could easily be carried by the tonnage still available, if it were concentrated on that route instead of being dispersed all over the sea-ways of the world. This concentration would also reduce the amount of miscellaneous patrol work needed for commerce protection, and thus lighten the Navy's task and enable it to carry on a more vigorous campaign against the submarines.

The proposal came at a fortunate moment, when the Admiralty had just consented to approve the introduction of the convoy system. Had it not done so, the concentration of all or a very heavy share of shipping in one ocean and on the constricted routes leading from it to Great Britain, might well have increased our disasters by giving the U-boats a more abundant supply of targets. But the setting-up of the Atlantic convoys enabled a high degree of protection to be assured to shipping using that ocean.

Purchasing Departments were urged in future to order their supplies as far as possible from the United States and Canada, and to limit their commitments in other markets to the lowest possible level. The co-operation of America was essential, and Mr. Balfour

could take the matter up with the Government there. A special Committee might be set up to consider the effects of the plan on our export trade, and propose ways and means of keeping the harm done to it as low as possible. A certain amount of import and export trade with India and the Dominions would have to continue.

The War Cabinet considered the idea on 30th May, 1917, and approved it. Our shipping arrangements were thereupon adapted as far as possible to the plan so approved, and during the extremely difficult and anxious time through which we were passing in the summer and autumn of 1917, these arrangements greatly increased the carrying capacity of our shipping, and helped very considerably to bring us through.

Practical measures of this sort, based upon enlightened common sense and carried out by competent business men, were among the measures adopted to increase the effective capacity of our tonnage and thus neutralise the ravages of the submarines. But they by no measure cover the whole of the plans adopted by the Ministry to make a more businesslike use of our tonnage. In the next chapter I propose to describe other steps they took to economise our sea transport.

## CHAPTER XLIII

### SHIPPING PROBLEMS

#### 1. RELIEVING CONGESTION AT THE PORTS

THE unprecedented activities of the War led to a complete overthrow of the normal organisation and functioning of British ports. This is not surprising in view of the fact that the whole of Britain's war effort had to go through her ports and harbours. Our Navy was using many of our harbours as bases for some of its activities. Southampton was closed to merchant shipping. Prize cargoes of war contraband were being constantly brought into the ports and dumped in the warehouses along the wharves, to wait the adjudication of the Prize Court. Government purchases of supplies arrived in big consignments, and had to wait distribution. This exceptional activity on unusual lines would in any event have created a great deal of confusion and congestion. The problem was intensified by the fact that so many of the regular dock workers had joined up and, as a result, there was a shortage of labour to handle goods.

The steps taken to deal with this problem during the first part of the War can be briefly summarised.

As early as 22nd January, 1915, a deputation of shipowners waited on the President of the Board of

Trade to call his attention to the congestion of the ports, and to make a series of recommendations, including the pooling of privately-owned *Shipowners' railway trucks ; the co-ordination of* *deputation to military and commercial demands ;* *Board of Trade* penal rents on goods not promptly removed from quays ; and an enquiry into the question of labour at the ports. Strong but unavailing resolutions were also passed by the Diversion of Shipping Committee in the course of 1915 as to the need for dealing with port congestion. Their representations, says Mr. C. E. Fayle\* were either ignored or went astray in the mazes of departmental routine. It was nearly ten months after the January deputation before the Port and Transit Executive Committee was set up to deal with the matter. It at once began what developed into a persistent struggle with the recruiting authorities to prevent men being called up for the Army from the ranks of dockworkers.

Among the reasons urged for the restriction of imports by the Shipping Control Committee in their memorandum of 10th February, 1916, *Recommendations of Shipping Control Committee* on this subject occurs the following statement :—

“ The reduction in imports would give an opportunity to the ports to clear their congestion, and in the meantime the Port and Transit Executive Committee would, it is hoped, be able to reorganise the work of the ports. A number of warehouses and stores in the country would be cleared, and be enabled to take quicker deliveries when the full flow of ordinary traffic is afterwards resumed.”

\* “ The War and the Shipping Industry,” p. 152.

Other suggestions were put forward by the Shipping Committee in their memorandum of 10th February, and discussed from time to time. Some of them reached the formal stage of approval by the Board of Trade and sanction by the War Committee. Only a few travelled any distance beyond that stage.

Mr. Runciman, in his memorandum of 24th October, 1916—that is, nearly two years after the shipowners had called his attention to the congestion at the ports and its causes—said :—

“ It is significant that returns obtained by the Port and Transit Executive Committee show that no port claims to be able to give more than a normal rate of discharge to the ships, and many of them report a rate considerably below normal. . . . In view of the fact that the available labour at the ports has with difficulty handled the work in an unusually slack period, it is clear that urgent action is necessary if our ports are not to be blocked during the busier season now commencing.”

Mr. Runciman followed this up by a further memorandum on 9th November, in the course of which he said :—

“ The effectiveness of our tonnage is diminishing by reason of the slowness of loading and discharging which is intensified as more men are taken away from the docks, harbours, railways, warehouses, carting and wagon industries. We are getting less transport out of each 100 vessels than we got a year ago.”

Meantime, a memorandum on 1st November, 1916, submitted by the Shipping Control Committee directed attention to the congestion of our transport in French ports :—

*Congestion in  
French ports*

“ It is not only at British, but even more at French ports, that the flow of traffic is being impeded. Ships are being delayed in French ports to an extent that is causing serious waste of tonnage. The two following among many similar instances, have recently occurred :—

*Thistleard*, 7,600 tons d.w. :—

Arrived in roads, Bordeaux, about 9th October. Docked Bordeaux about 27th October. Expected to be discharged 17th November. Say total five weeks, as compared with ten days in normal circumstances.

*Algeriana*, 7,370 tons d.w. :—

Arrived in roads, Bordeaux, 13th October. Still waiting berth 30th October.

With a view to preventing these delays, the Committee feel that His Majesty's Government would be well advised to press the French Government to do everything in their power to improve the condition at the ports, in order that vessels may receive prompter dispatch.

Acting upon instruction from the War Committee and with the sanction of the Admiralty and War Office, one of our members, Mr. Royden, made a special visit to certain of the ports in Northern France in June last, and presented a report containing a number of valuable suggestions. Our

information is that few of these have been carried into effect, and we again call attention to the matter.

Similar, if not worse conditions prevail in the Bay Ports of France, which, so far as we know, no sustained effort has been made to alleviate."

With regard to the question of importing foreign labour for work at the docks, the Committee's report stated :—

" It is understood that it would not be possible to introduce foreign labour into this country on account of the Trade Unions. No similar difficulty, however, appears to present itself in France. The Committee therefore suggests that foreign labour (e.g., Portuguese) should be imported into France for dock work in order that the British labour battalions now working at the French ports may be released and returned to this country.

The Committee are also disposed to urge that the question of employment of enemy prisoners of war in British docks under conditions analogous to those which have been successfully adopted in French ports should be reconsidered."

These matters were brought forward at the War Committee on 3rd November, 1916, when it was decided to see what could be done in the way of using foreign labour in French ports. But, taking it all in all, no really effective steps were taken in 1915 and 1916 to organise the traffic at the ports, with a view to saving time and tonnage. There was some fumbling about the mobilisation of a Transport Labour Battalion at the ports, but it came to nothing.

When the increase of shipping facilities was becoming more and more a matter of life and death to the nation and its Allies, these removable delays were intolerable. Up to the present, they had been met by facile and fatalist predictions that we could carry on for a few more months and no longer. The new Government felt it must cleave a way through all these difficulties and that it could be done. There were serious obstacles but they must be overcome. The congestion problem is an illustration of the nature of the difficulties and of the way they were gradually removed.

*Firm action  
of new  
Government*

On 31st January, 1917, the Shipping Controller submitted to the War Cabinet a memorandum respecting delays at certain ports in unloading cargoes.

*Proposals of  
Shipping  
Controller*

It was suggested that if the railways could handle the cargoes more expeditiously, the ships would be "turned round" more speedily, and the result would be an estimated saving in tonnage of 4,000,000 to 5,000,000 tons per annum. At the instance of Sir Albert Stanley an Inter-Departmental Committee composed of representatives of the Shipping Controller, Ministry of Munitions and Board of Trade, was set up to investigate and report what steps, if any, could be taken which would secure the quicker unloading of the ships.

*A Committee  
appointed*

This Committee produced a first Summary Report on 16th February, 1917, suggesting a series of drastic measures.

The Report of the Committee was considered by the War Cabinet on 19th February, and the following



conclusions were reached in respect of the Committee's ten points :—

It was decided that the sale of British railway waggons for export should be prohibited, except under licence issued by the Board of Trade.

*Its recommendations adopted.*

*Scope of new measures*

It was noted that, as stated by the President of the Board of Trade, machinery was being set up by the Board of Trade for the pooling of private railway waggons ; and it was agreed that the Board of Trade should seek powers to enable the railway companies to load empty privately-owned vehicles on the return journey.

It was decided that the Secretary of State for War should be requested to submit a note explaining why the 10,000 men promised by the War Office at the meeting of the War Cabinet held on 21st December, 1916, . . . had not been released for the Transport Workers' Battalion as arranged, and it should be pointed out to him that serious difficulties had arisen from the failure in the supply of these men, of whom the Shipping Controller stated he had only 6,000 at his disposal.

It was decided that as labour on canals, locomotive repair, cartage, and loading and unloading of waggons at ports and destinations, were all questions of shortage of labour, the Secretary of Mr. Illingworth's Inter-Departmental Committee should confer or communicate with the Director of National Service and the War Office on the subject.

It was noted that the President of the Board of Trade stated that he was preparing machinery to enable the railway companies to take drastic measures to enforce the prompt unloading of

waggon at destination in order to put a stop to the present practice of utilising waggon at depots.

It was noted that the Shipping Controller stated that he would take up, through the Port and Transit Executive Committee, the question of the possibility of dumping raw and semi-raw materials in the open, where necessary, to relieve congestion, particularly as regards materials belonging to the Ministry of Munitions.

It was decided that the Secretary of Mr. Illingworth's Committee should consult with the Secretary of State for War in regard to the release by the War Office of any transit sheds or dock sites in use by the Government for any other than the purposes for which they had been designed.

All these recommendations were promptly put into operation with almost startling results in the way of releasing tonnage for the High Seas. The submarine was fought on land as well as on sea, and it was the combination that beat off the attack and thus saved the Allies from overwhelming disaster.

Not all the delays suffered by shipping were due to slowness in handling their loading, unloading and bunkering in ports. Frequently they *Contributory causes of delay* would be held up in port for some days on account of reports of a submarine in the vicinity. It was calculated that during the end of 1916 and the early months of 1917, the Germans had established an efficient outward blockade by this means equivalent to 40 per cent. of the days in a year.

A further complication was added by the fact that with the extension of Government requisitioning the owners ceased to have the same interest in their

business. They did not appear to realise that now, if ever, was the time when their utmost efforts should be put forth to get their ships round quickly. They were still working as in peace time, each company with its private berths, and no one working for the common good, to help his neighbours, either by offering the use of an empty berth or by turning over a supply of bunkers which were not immediately required.

The result was that a great deal more time was being spent in Liverpool than was necessary, nor was the situation in America much better. Some of the large, fast ships such as the *Adriatic* were taking 50 to 55 days for the round trip, as against 25 days in 1916. This difficulty had to be dealt with by bringing Government pressure to bear on shipowners who were disposed to take too narrow and selfish a view of their responsibilities in a national emergency.

The difficulties arising out of the grouping of ships under the convoy system were also dealt with.

In January, 1918, a Convoy Committee was formed by the Liverpool shipowners, with the *Achievements of Convoy Committees and Port convoy officers* sanction of the Ministry of Shipping, and the Ministry also invited the New York owners to form a similar committee. Port convoy officers, similar to those who had been appointed here, were sent to the United States in the spring of 1918, and the Ministry of Shipping's Report on Convoys states that :—

“ The average total stay of tramps in United States ports fell from  $27\frac{1}{2}$  days in January to  $16\frac{3}{4}$  days in September, while that of liners was reduced from  $22\frac{1}{2}$  days to 14 days. The delay waiting for convoys which had been  $3\frac{1}{2}$  days for tramps, was brought down to an average of 2 days, and the

same cause of detention in the case of liners, which had averaged as much as 5 days, was in September only  $1\frac{1}{2}$  days. The time spent in loading was, in the case of tramps, lessened by nearly 50 per cent., and 20 per cent. was taken off the loading days of the liners. . . .

In Liverpool the Convoy Committee soon got to work, especially with the large Atlantic liners, and after the H.X. Convoy for this type of vessel had been based on New York, they succeeded so well in their dispatch that aided by the efforts of their counterpart in New York the goal of a 40 day turn round was attained in 77 per cent. of the voyages, and a few ships with a cargo of about 3,000 tons, such as the *Melita* did the round trip in 32 days. The average turn round, taking the bad with the good, for the whole of the H.X. Convoys was 42.68 days. . . .

All these endeavours undoubtedly effected great improvements in the dispatch of tonnage, and there is little doubt that the attention devoted to the subject by those interested in the convoys stimulated those concerned in the loading and discharging to achieve better results than were the rule in the era when ships ran independently."

Up to the end of the War it was of course inevitable that the exceptional difficulties under which all shipping had to operate should involve a certain measure of delay as compared with peace-time conditions. But under the Ministry of Shipping these delays were thus gradually reduced and avoided in a very high degree.

By these measures the shipping capacity of the country was very considerably increased at a time

when our actual tonnage was being appreciably reduced by the action of submarines.

## 2. CONTROL AND RESTRICTION OF IMPORTS

Now we come to the further measures taken by the Government to secure the most economical use of our dwindling shipping resources, and to cut down as fully as possible all non-essential imports, in order to concentrate upon the supply of the nation's rigidly essential needs.

These measures ought to have been taken systematically as soon as it became clear—as it certainly did in 1915—that the War might last for years, and would strain the resources of the belligerent nations to the utmost, and especially when it became evident that our tonnage was becoming more and more inadequate to the demands made upon it. Whilst our vital war demands were increasing and would continue to increase, our available shipping was diminishing through submarine action and ordinary sea losses and being insufficiently replaced. The measures enforced prior to 1917 for the limitation of imports were of a timid and half-hearted character, and had only a very limited effect in determining which of our imports should be sacrificed to the shipping shortage.

There were two lines of action by which the Government and the nation could adapt themselves to the reduction in their imports forced upon them by shortage of shipping. One was to cut down consumption to the lowest practicable limits, in fact confining it to the barest essentials. The other was to increase to

*Tardy  
adoption of  
restrictions*

*Two ways of  
facing shortage  
of supplies*

the utmost the home production of commodities formerly imported. Both methods were applied by the Government as fully as possible during the last two years of the War. In this section I deal only with the first.

Economising is always a painful process. Few and exceptionally fortunate are the households that have never come face to face with the necessity for cutting down superfluities and even some comforts, owing to a temporary financial stress. It is always a struggle to begin the process. Afterwards it becomes easier. In practice it is almost invariably put off to the last moment. Experience tends to show that it is often postponed until it is too late to save the family from irretrievable bankruptcy. In this case starvation threatened the whole nation. When at last we grappled with our problem we recognised that stern economy is much easier to achieve if it is universally enforced, for selfishness is not the greatest obstacle to reducing expenditure, but habit and, more particularly, pride. The intervention of a superior authority breaks the force of habit, and pride is mollified by the fact that all one's neighbours are in the same plight. When it is a national necessity, patriotism enlists pride on the side of sacrifice. No one then can point the finger of hurtful pity at the reduced household, for under these conditions it is the extravagant who become objects of public scorn. The gap between the habitual standard of life and the irreducible minimum varies according to countries, and in every country it varies according to classes. But all countries and most classes can sacrifice something without being reduced to a weakening penury. It is only when ingredients essential to sustain vitality are dispensed with that

*Tendency to  
shirk essential  
economics*

the health of the people begins to suffer. In food-stuffs, drink, clothes, amenities, amusements, there was a good deal that Britain could give up without damage to its health. There were some demands essential to the upkeep and development of a civilised community, e.g. the building of new houses or the repair and decoration of the old, which could be put off for two or three years without inflicting intolerable hardship on the community. The postponement of building operations led to a great deal of overcrowding in munition areas, but at its worst it was not comparable to the insanitary congestion of the slums. It is when deprivation becomes privation—when the cutting down cuts to the quick—that the national strength and morale become impaired. That is what happened in Russia, Germany and Austria. Could we avert a like catastrophe here? This was our problem.

We were faced with an inevitable reduction of our total imports. We had to ask three questions.

*Three questions* First : what can the nation do without—that is, without impairing its efficiency? Secondly : how much deprivation will it stand without perilous disgruntlement?

Thirdly : to what extent can we produce at home essential commodities hitherto brought across the seas? This last question is dealt with in other chapters. Here we are concerned with the two former questions and with the policy of import restriction framed in relation to them.

A certain restriction of imports was imposed on the country by the reduction in the tonnage available to bring them to our shores. I have spoken elsewhere of the immense demands on our shipping made by our expeditionary forces and by our Allies. Added

to this was the reduction in available tonnage caused by war and marine losses, and by the falling-off in the rate of shipbuilding during the first two years of war. When the vessels withdrawn for war services, and those sunk and lost, were subtracted from our original total, there was nothing like enough tonnage left to maintain our imports at the pre-War level. The question was not : shall we have fewer imports? That was inevitable. It was : shall we deliberately cut away the imports we can do without, and concentrate on those that are essential ; or shall we leave it to chance, in the hope that without choice or direction the most important commodities will find their way to us ?

Nothing could be more significant of the change which the Second Coalition introduced into the handling of our shipping resources than the way in which successive Ministers dealt with this question of imports. Sir Joseph Maclay and Mr. Runciman were both shipowners ; the former by practice, the latter by parentage. While Sir Joseph Maclay grappled with the problem on the principle that complete control was vital, Mr. Runciman's treatment of it suffered from that spirit of procrastination and timidity, from that readiness to assume that something resolved at a Committee was thereby an accomplished fact, which in this and other Departments of State brought us by the end of 1916 perilously near the precipice.

In 1913, the imports into this country totalled nearly 53 million tons in weight. In the first year of the War, despite the enormously increased pressure of demand for goods, they fell to 50 million tons. The main discriminating factor which



determined what goods should be left out was the rise in freight rates resulting from that pressure of demand, operating on a reduced supply of tonnage.

*First measures to meet fall of imports* The goods which could best afford to pay the bigger rates were imported. The others were cut out. This was not a planned process ; and there was no guarantee that it would give us the goods we most needed. It was, fortunately, supplemented by other measures. Steps were taken very early to ensure our supplies of meat and wheat by requisitioning refrigerator ships and wheat vessels, and later on the M'Kenna Duties were imposed to restrict luxury imports. In November, 1915, the Ship Licensing Committee began to help the situation by refusing licences where the charters were for the carriage of wasteful and unnecessary imports. But the system of licence could not be pressed far in this service without a plan behind it for the imports which were and those which were not to be permitted.

Speaking of the position at that stage in the War, Fayle says :—

“ It was not merely a question of the luxury trades, the volume of which was small, but of a choice between commodities commonly

*Fayle describes the problem* regarded as necessities ; and only the Government were in a position to say, in the light of war requirements, what imports were and what were not essential. The task lay well within their scope ; it was capable of administrative solution. . . .

The Government, however, shrank from the responsibility involved. . . .”\*

\* “ The War and the Shipping Industry,” p. 156.

On 10th February, 1916, the Shipping Control Committee presented a report to the President of the Board of Trade, outlining the position with regard to British tonnage available for supplying the needs of this country, and urging the restriction of imports which could best be dispensed with as the only way in which our shipping would be enabled to cope with its task.

The report showed that out of 3,468 steamers of 1,600 tons gross and upwards, with a total tonnage of 15,441,000 tons, the number already requisitioned for war purposes, or trading in other parts of the world (not to and from the United Kingdom), was 1,894, with a tonnage of 8,373,000 tons. Thus, for carrying essential imports for the ordinary needs of the population there were only 1,574 vessels available, with a gross tonnage of 7,068,000 tons—less than half the British mercantile fleet. In this total of 1,574 were included those vessels that had been requisitioned by the Admiralty to bring wheat and sugar to Great Britain.

Figures were submitted to show that 10,328,000 tons gross of British shipping would be needed, after making allowance for the maximum amount of goods that might be carried in foreign vessels, to meet the import trade of the United Kingdom on the level of the first year of the War, and to furnish certain extra tonnage for which our allies France and Italy were making urgent demands. Our available shipping fell short of this by 3½ million tons gross, representing the carrying capacity for 13 million tons' weight of imports in a year.

*Estimate of  
shipping  
shortage*

The maximum we could hope to obtain by the aid

of British and foreign shipping in 1915 would be 37 million tons, and the Committee proceeded to face the question of how we could best arrange to meet the hardship involved in foregoing about 25 per cent. of the imports we had obtained—nearly 50 million tons—in the previous year.

The Shipping Control Committee did not put forward a list of the items which should be totally or partially prohibited to achieve this result. They made, instead, a list of the items of food and raw materials and other essential commodities which they considered we should have to import. These, they proposed, should be imported on the 1915 scale, except in the case of timber and paper and paper-making materials, where they suggested definite cuts—of 1,000,000 tons of timber and 800,000 tons of paper and paper-making materials. Subject to these cuts, their list of essential imports totalled 35,375,000 tons. A margin was thus left of 1,635,000 tons to complete the possible 37 million tons of imports, and they proposed that everything outside their list should be prohibited, beyond a few miscellaneous necessary articles which might be covered by the million odd tons of the margin.

The plan was a somewhat blunt and crude one. Sir Arthur Salter says of it :—

“ A reduction of this kind and on this scale, effected by direct and absolute prohibition, would have had incalculable results upon the still unexamined and unorganised economic system of the country, and the information and preparatory work behind the recommendation were clearly not sufficient

*Committee's  
proposals for  
planned  
restrictions*

*Salter's  
comments on  
the plan*

to warrant such drastic action. In particular, later experience showed that while a certain limited number of articles could be excluded altogether as unnecessary, the economy that could be effected in this way was relatively small. The great bulk of any reduction must be made not by the total exclusion of certain articles but by the exclusion of all beyond certain points. . . .”\*

As events subsequently proved, the Shipping Control Committee took too pessimistic a view of the importing capacity of our shipping resources. Instead of only 37 million tons, we succeeded in 1916 in importing 42.3 million tons, so that the restriction of our total imports imposed on us by the *force majeure* of shipping shortage was not 13 million but less than 8 million tons.

Unfortunately, however, only a small part of this enforced reduction was planned for by the Board of Trade. After they had examined the *Ineffectual efforts of Board of Trade* situation in the light of the Committee's report, Mr. Runciman reported to the War Committee, on 8th March, 1916, that the utmost deliberate reduction in non-essential imports which at that moment he could definitely hope to achieve by methods of restriction did not exceed 4,000,000 tons. The War Committee recommended that the President of the Board of Trade should have a free hand to use his discretion in cutting down imports, subject to reference, in particular cases, to the Departments concerned.

How did the 4,000,000 undertaking work out? On 24th October, 1916 (seven months after the undertaking to plan a reduction of 4,000,000 tons),

\* “Allied Shipping Control,” p. 65.

Mr. Runciman presented a memorandum on the subject of Merchant Shipping, in which, speaking of the restriction of imports, he said that the full effect of the restrictions he had devised had not yet been experienced, but it was estimated that the total annual saving would amount to something between 1,500,000 and 1,800,000 tons' weight of imports. He added that after careful inquiry, the Board of Trade were of the opinion that it was not practicable to bring about further material reduction of unessential imports by the instrument of direct prohibition. A further reduction would be secured indirectly by high prices, by the gradual cessation of unessential industries in this country owing to withdrawal of labour, etc., and by the very fact of the shortage of ships.

*Plans not carried out* A very lengthy list had by this time been compiled of provisionally prohibited goods, which could only be imported by permission and licence of the Board of Trade. But such licence was forthcoming freely enough to cut down the possible effect of the prohibition to the slender limits indicated by Mr. Runciman, whose main hope continued to be, not in a fully planned control of imports, but in the undirected and uncontrolled operation of high freights. In the absence both of a considered restriction of imports and of national requisition of all our shipping, tonnage strayed into voyages where the freights were fat. So that while shipping shortage cut down our 1916 imports by between 7 and 8 million tons, not more than  $1\frac{1}{2}$  million tons were excluded through deliberate restrictions.

On 15th December, 1916, after the change of

Government, the Shipping Control Committee sent a long communication to me in reply to my request for information on merchant shipping, shipowners' profits, and cutting down of imports. In this letter they said :—

*Complaint of  
Shipping  
Control  
Committee*

“From the very beginning of their work in January last this Committee have urged the necessity of restricting imports in order to make the supply of tonnage meet the demands made upon it. The Committee's recommendations were set out in a Memorandum to the Board of Trade, dated 10th February. . . . At that time it had been proposed that the importation of particular articles which are not essential should be prohibited or restricted. The Committee suggested that in lieu of a list of articles that may *not* be imported there should be prepared a list of necessary articles that *may* be imported, and that it should be decided for a period to be fixed that nothing but those articles should be allowed to be imported. *This recommendation* was carried out, but in so small a degree that the effect on tonnage was negligible. What seemed to the Committee urgent then applies to-day in a still greater degree.”

Ten months' discussion, examination and recommendation by an able and influential Committee had produced “negligible” results, when we were face to face with defeat through lack of sea transport for essentials. Committees are helpful to guide men of action on the right course. But for weak or remiss administrators they only afford an excuse for postponing movement on embarrassing questions.

Following upon this communication, I had an interview with the Shipping Controller and brought the matter to the notice of the War Cabinet on 21st December, 1916. We decided that an Inter-Departmental Committee should be at once assembled to consider and report on the question of the restriction of imports.

*War Cabinet takes action* An exhaustive examination of all our imports was made, in order to determine where the necessary reductions could best be made.

*Drastic restrictions enforced* A programme was prepared, based on the assumption of imports being 500,000 tons a month (i.e., six million tons a year) less in 1917 than in 1916. A detailed programme of restrictions was submitted to meet the expected six-million-ton fall in our imports. The cuts proposed affected a large range of commodities. With one of the largest items, timber, and with the way in which we were able to adopt it, I deal in another section. In paper and paper-making materials a cut of 50 per cent. of the 1916 imports was proposed. To ease the strain upon our grain imports, a further drastic reduction of brewing was proposed, of which I gave an account in the chapter on Food. Feeding-stuffs for farm stocks were cut down; and this step, by tending to bring about an earlier and more extensive killing of stock, made possible a reduction in meat imports. Altogether the proposals of the Committee were of a very drastic character, and they were approved with slight modification by the Government.

But meantime the intensive submarine campaign against our shipping had got under way. In the first two months of 1917, 900,000 tons of Allied and Neutral shipping were sent to the bottom, and

with them we lost the valuable cargoes of grain and other essential imports they were carrying.

It became clear that we should have to reckon on a reduction, not of six million but of eight, ten or more millions of tons of imports. The committee promptly met this challenge by further proposals, which they submitted on 21st February, 1917, for still more drastic cuts in timber, paper, fruit, and vegetables, glass bottles, feeding-stuffs, iron-ore, sugar and other commodities. They suggested that sugar rationing might enable sugar imports to be reduced without serious hardship. The more important of these reductions were approved by the Cabinet.

No time was lost in putting into force these various measures. A report of the Board of Trade, dated 10th May, 1917, on "Imports in Relation to Shipping," showed that by the month of April—the second month after these restrictions were planned—the decrease in the imports of restricted goods, as compared with the volume of imports of these goods in April, 1916, was 499,000 tons for the month. Thus the initial aim of a planned reduction of 500,000 tons a month had in fact been achieved already.

The report said that, "*To meet the necessity of curtailment a policy was adopted which was originally intended to save about 4,500,000 tons in 1917, and there are prospects of its saving more than 6,000,000.*"

Our actual imports in 1917 were 7.9 million tons less than in 1916. In the course of the year, 6,000,000 tons of Allied and Neutral shipping were sunk by the enemy, most of it with cargoes. It is clear that only the careful organisation of our imports, which secured that upwards of 6,000,000 tons of the



reductions imposed on us by our shipping losses should fall on classes of goods we could arrange to dispense with, made it possible for the country to carry on its activities effectively in the face of such an attack.

But it is fair to say that the achievement was the result of a co-ordinated effort which made us less dependent on overseas supplies even for essentials. Food production at home was increased by efforts which I describe elsewhere in this volume. Timber felling was organised thoroughly so that we could dispense with the bulky cargoes which took up so much of our tonnage. We opened up disused iron, copper, and manganese mines. We drew more of the necessities of individual and national existence from our own internal resources than we had done for at least half a century.

*Contributory activities*

The task was immense. Control was extended over practically all commodities. All ships, tramps and liners alike, were brought under requisition. Restriction and economy were enforced in every direction. Sir Arthur Salter gives a description of the process :—

*Thorough control enforced*

“ The ultimate needs of the scores of millions of individuals who required commodities needing transport were sifted many times through a series of sieves of smaller and smaller mesh, but never small enough, before they reached the executive point of requisition and allocation. . . . The total needs for tonnage were received by the Shipping Department, handled and translated into terms of so many ships at given places and dates by the three

executive branches (Naval, Military and Commercial), and as such presented as indents on the Requisitioning Branch. . . . And this indent always exceeded the total in the pool. So each week the heads of these four branches met in an unofficial committee for a final pruning of the total demand. . . . Even while the plan was being framed the submarine would be busy, or a military emergency, or later statistics of food prospects and food requirements, or . . . [etc., etc.] would require a change in allocation."

The difficulties of control and restriction are evident in this picture ; but so also is the fact that a system was evolved which during the last two years of the War exercised a real guiding control over the whole field of imports, and carried out a flexible, day-to-day adaptation of its restrictive powers, so as to secure at all times the exclusion of the less vital in favour of the more vital imports. Thereby we won through the acute perils of 1917. Had we continued the haphazard methods of 1916, which offered systematic planning to cover only 1,500,000 to 1,800,000 tons of the reduction of imports which we had to face, it needs little foresight to perceive what disaster would have overtaken us before 1917 was half spent.

### 3. THE SUPPLY OF HOME-GROWN TIMBER

As the shipping shortage developed and measures had to be devised to economise our available tonnage, the imports of timber were regarded as a commodity specially suitable for restriction, both because timber is very bulky in relation to its value, and because it

was possible to replace for a time a great deal of our imports by supplies produced at home, from the woods and forests of Britain and France.

Hitherto the timber of Great Britain had been a very badly neglected asset. At the outbreak of the War, Britain had a smaller proportion of wood and forest land than any country in Europe except Portugal; and the output of our three million acres of woodland was about one-third of what it should have been under efficient management. A beginning had been made with the scientific development of afforestation by the Development Commissioners under the Development and Road Improvement Funds Act, which I carried in 1909, but there had been little time before the War for the Commissioners to achieve anything definite in a matter such as afforestation, where time is counted not in years but in decades. Just before the War the annual felling of British timber was estimated to amount to about 45,000,000 cubic feet—nearly one million loads—while our imports in 1913 were 10.4 million loads.

The timber was required for a variety of indispensable uses. Nearly three million loads consisted of pit-props and pit-wood for use in the coal-mines. A very large quantity was needed for building. Furniture took its share. And a great deal of the imported soft wood was used for making boxes, packing-cases and crates for the dispatch and distribution of manufactured goods.

With the advent of war, the demand for timber grew considerably. Manufacture of armaments and munitions made an increased demand for coal, and so for pit-props. The swelling torrent of supplies which

*Pre-War  
neglect of  
forestry*

*Timber  
requirements  
of industry  
and commerce*

poured overseas to our expeditionary forces called for an immense number of boxes, including ammunition boxes. If private building largely stopped, building of factories, of army hutments, both here and in France, went on very rapidly, and for this work wood was in chief demand. Trench warfare again involved wood, as did railway construction behind the lines, with its call for innumerable sleepers, and there were the miles of duckboards needed to cross the sodden and shell-pocked areas.

Wood, in short, was more than ever indispensable. But we could not spare the tonnage space to carry this bulky commodity here from distant countries. As early as 1915, the *Home-grown Timber Committee* Government set up the Home-grown Timber Committee to promote the development of timber supplies from our own native resources, and early in 1916, when the first steps were taken to effect a reduction in our imports, it was decided to cut down the imports of pit-props and seek to obtain them more largely from sources in this country.

Timber imports showed an inevitable drop during the first two years of the War, but not so great a drop as might have been expected, in view of the possibility of substituting the home-grown article. The Final Report of the *Limited achievements in 1915-1916* Forestry Sub-Committee of the Reconstruction Committee, issued in May, 1917, estimated that the 1915 timber imports represented 75 per cent. and those for 1916, 62 per cent. of the average imports in the five years before the War. But as all our imports were lower in these two years, the proportional reduction was much slighter. In 1909-1913, timber averaged 11.6 per cent. of our total

imports ; in 1915 it was 11.4 per cent. and in 1916, 10.5 per cent.

The serious shipping situation with which the new War Cabinet was confronted at the beginning of 1917 called, as is told in another section, for further drastic reductions of imports. *Import reductions in 1917* Lord Curzon's Committee, set up by the Cabinet on 21st December, 1916, to examine this question, recommended that out of a total restriction of 500,000 tons a month, 200,000 tons should be at the expense of timber imports. The War Cabinet examined the Committee's Report on 16th February, 1917, and in order to ensure that such a reduction should be carried out without leading to such a timber shortage as would hamper our military efforts, we decided to appoint a Director of Timber Supplies at the War Office, with an Inter-Departmental Committee to assist him. The first holder of this post was Sir J. Bampfylde Fuller. On 19th February, we decided at a War Cabinet meeting that timber imports must be cut down by a further 100,000 tons a month—making a total reduction of 300,000 tons a month. The question was further considered by us on 21st February. A memorandum submitted by the Committee on Restriction of Imports pointed out that the reduction of timber imports by the amount of 200,000 tons a month originally proposed would leave the timber imports in 1917 at a rate of 364,000 tons a month ; a further reduction of 100,000 tons would thus mean cutting off well over half our 1916 timber imports. There was timber enough in France and the United Kingdom to replace this amount, but possibilities of greater home production were limited by labour shortage, scarcity of sawing plant, and difficulties of

transport. In this country we could produce a further 1,000,000 tons of pit-props, in addition to the 300,000 tons already allowed for, if labour and transport could be forthcoming. And if large additional supplies of labour were made available in France, the import of sawn timber for the use of the Expeditionary Force could be considerably reduced.

We asked the War Office to enlist the aid of a timber expert to see how far the total requirements of our Army in France could be met from supplies of timber in the vicinity of our front ; what labour could be provided by the Army, and what transport was needed there. I may here say that a great deal of timber cutting was organised in France by the late Lord Lovat, largely with labour furnished by Canadian lumbermen drawn from the Canadian Expeditionary Force in France.

*Canadian  
lumbermen  
for France*

With regard to the problem of increasing our home output of timber, we decided to make enquiries of our Dominions to see how far they could help with skilled men, and also to enquire about the possibility of obtaining Finnish and other foreign labour for the work.

The War Office had already asked the Canadian Government for 5,000 Canadian lumbermen. On 2nd March, 1917, the War Cabinet was informed by the Canadian representatives that they would do their best to increase this number ; it would be easier if the men were not required to wear khaki. Those already being supplied were in uniform, and were drawn from the Canadian forces. We also received an offer of 1,500 lumbermen from Newfoundland.

One of the difficulties of timber-cutting in this country was that the available woodlands were

often individually small, and widely scattered, so that apart from the Royal Forests there were few acres where large scale sawing machinery was either available or capable of being economically used. But at our meeting of 2nd March I was able to report to the War Cabinet a generous offer by *Mr. de Rothschild's offer* Mr. Alfred de Rothschild of his two valuable forests in the Chilterns as a free gift to the country. This offer had been communicated to me by him in the following letter :—

“ 1, Seamore Place,  
Mayfair.

28th February, 1917.

My dear Mr. Prime Minister,

I feel that I am hardly justified in troubling you with these lines when you are so overwhelmed with work, but I feel also that you will forgive me when you have read the same.

I am, namely, most anxious to place at your entire disposal the woods which I possess on my Halton Estate, where, as you no doubt know, a very large camp has been in existence since the commencement of the War—the average about 15,000 soldiers and sometimes as many as 20,000.

I am, I must confess, not an expert as regards what sort of timber would be suitable for ‘pit-props,’ but I cannot help thinking that, as there are so many fine trees in my woods at Halton, some of them at least would be suitable for that purpose. Might I ask you very kindly to send down your own expert who would very easily be able to report fully on the subject, and I should

indeed be proud if my offer to you should lead to any practical result.

I hope I have made it perfectly clear, dear Sir, that the offer to you is for your *kind acceptance*, and that it is not at all a question of *selling a branch* or a *leaf*.

May I take this opportunity of congratulating you on being Prime Minister. The country congratulates itself.

I remain,

My dear Mr. Prime Minister,

Yours most sincerely,

ALFRED M. S. ROTHSCHILD."

I promptly replied, expressing my appreciation of the generous spirit which prompted him to make this gift, by which the country would greatly benefit; and the War Cabinet also sent him its thanks when I communicated to them the terms of the offer. It was very happily timed to help us in our immediate difficulties, and before long the splendid slopes of beech forest on the Chilterns were laid low by Canadian lumber-jacks.

Scotland was at this time our bright spot for home-produced timber. The trade there was well-organised, and Scotland was not only self-supporting in regard to its chief timber requirements, particularly in pit-props, but was able to send supplies to some of the northern counties of England. It had a highly skilled labour force of 4,500 men, for which its timber merchants put up a most dogged fight when in May, 1917, the War Office proposed to call up a number of them for the Army.

*Scottish  
timber  
organisation*

In England and Wales we had at this time no such



well-organised body of native foresters, and we had to make use of men rejected for the Army, of soldiers temporarily released, of Canadian and Newfoundland lumbermen, Portuguese, Finnish seamen from torpedoed ships, prisoners of war, and women workers. A contingent of United States lumbermen came over in 1917, but was presently transferred to the American Forestry Corps in France.

This miscellaneous array of labour had a task of vital importance to fulfil. For our timber imports in

1917 were perforce cut down very drastically. Whereas in 1913 they had amounted altogether to over 11½ million tons, in 1917 they were reduced to 2,875,000 tons. Part of this reduction was provided for by very careful economies. A great deal of our requirements for our Expeditionary Force was met by forestry work in France. At home we raised the output of timber of all kinds in the United Kingdom from the pre-War level of about 900,000 tons to 3,000,000 tons in 1917. In 1918 this was increased still further to over 4½ million tons, of which 2,000,000 tons represented mining timber. The imports in 1918 were reduced by 1,200,000 tons from the 1917 level.

The nature of the labour used for this work is shown by the following extract from a Report of the Timber Supply Department at the end of 1918 :—

“ At 1st October, 1918, the Department employed 8,728 British workmen ; 1,740 Portuguese ; 1,124 surplus seamen, mostly Finns from torpedoed ships ; 84 Danes ; 3,035 prisoners of war ; and 2,323 Women Fellers and Measurers. In addition, the Canadian Forestry Corps in Great

*Report of  
Timber Supply  
Department*

Britain at that date comprised 7,518 men and the Newfoundland Forestry Corps 427 men. . . .

The figures above given for labour have since been increased. The Department however endeavours as far as possible to use prisoners of war and other miscellaneous labour of which there is so pronounced a scarcity that the timber trade is far from being able to obtain the number of suitable men needed to yield the maximum production."

This Report, which was furnished to me by the Department on 28th October, 1918, concluded with the statement that : " The steps taken are such that there is every hope of tiding over the period of the War." This hope was splendidly fulfilled.

There was no more useful contribution to our mortal struggle with the submarine than this organisation of our home supplies of timber. It stripped this island of some of its best forest. Alas, the efforts made to replenish the loss have been perfunctory. Not only most of our hill sides, but large areas once clad in fine timber are now bare and broken.

*Post-War  
failure to  
re-afforest*

The lesson of the War has not yet been learnt in this and many other respects. Punishment is apt to teach the wrong lessons to its victims.



The Rt. Hon. Viscount Devonport



## CHAPTER XLIV

# CONTROLLING THE FOOD SUPPLIES

### I. FOOD PRODUCTION

THE established order reacts slowly and reluctantly to the appearance of an unexpected factor. No better illustration of this can be found than the manner in which the war direction of all belligerent countries overlooked the importance of organising during the War food supplies for their citizens. The feeding of armies was of course an important consideration in all wars. But food for non-combatants was their own concern. An army marched on its stomach, but there was no need to trouble about the marching equipment of those who stayed at home.

The food question ultimately decided the issue of this war. It was directly responsible for the downfall of Russia, finally it was the element that led to the collapse of Austria and Germany. Indirectly it was responsible for bringing America into the War, since Germany's indiscriminate submarine warfare was her answer to our blockade. Yet at first, and for some time, Germany was so indifferent to the jeopardy of famine lying in wait for her just below the horizon, that in 1915 she was selling grain to Holland. France had a real excuse in her occupied provinces for the serious deficiency in her wheat supplies. The Russian Government was thinking only of how it could supply

*Vital issue  
neglected by  
belligerents*

forage for its immense cavalry establishment, which rendered no decisive service in the War, and the transport which should have been used to feed the cities was diverted to the feeding of idle horses and useless horsemen. Here in Britain, whilst we were short of shipping for imperative war demands and our food supplies from overseas were becoming more and more precarious, we were allowing our own fertile soil to go out of cultivation without making any effort to keep up its yield of essential food. What is the explanation of so obtuse and general a neglect of this vital war front?

The War, in the view of the experts chiefly concerned with its direction, was an affair of the manœuvring and clashing of armies and navies. The food problem ended with the field kitchen. This was due to the general assumption that war on so colossal a scale could not last long. On that point both pacifist and militarist could agree to sit on the same parapet in complete accord. The pacifist predicted that the financial bankruptcy of nations would quickly supervene, and that the fires of war would soon die down for lack of fuel. He held, too, that the deadliness of modern weapons would effect losses so ghastly that after a short experience men would refuse to face them. The militarist was convinced that the onslaught of his huge armies with their shattering equipment would prove irresistible, and that complete victory could only be a matter of a few months. It is a proof of the tenacity with which a rooted conviction clings that neither the men of peace nor the men of war were able to change their outlook, even after the battles of the Marne and of Ypres had revealed the inconclusive character of the

*Disbelief  
in a  
long war*

fighting. In 1915 they still believed that a rapid decision was likely—the Germans on the Eastern Front, the French and British on the Western. Why therefore waste energy and man-power on the harvests of 1916, 1917 and 1918? It was a great piece of luck for us that we were not alone in cherishing this dangerous obsession. Neither intelligence nor stupidity are the monopoly of any single nation. Victory is a question of the balance at the critical moment. This fortuitous circumstance constituted an important element in saving us and ruining Germany. Had she devoted a reasonable share of forethought to her precarious food position, and started in 1915 to concentrate her scientific resources and great organising gifts on food production, she might have averted the disasters of 1918 and achieved a less humiliating peace.

*Germany's  
fatal  
oversight*

The conflict of foresight and obtuseness is clearly shown in the record of our own dealings with this issue. As early as the summer of 1915 a Committee was set up under the presidency of Lord Milner to consider measures for increasing the output of food. It reported that the country must go back to the agricultural system of the 'seventies; it must recover the old arable area by ploughing up the land which in the intervening decades had been laid down to permanent grass. A million more acres should be put under wheat. Guaranteed prices should be accorded for a four-year period to give farmers an inducement to break up their pasture, and better wages should be secured to agricultural workers.

This intelligent and constructive proposal had to wait nearly two years before it was carried into effect.

*Recommendation of  
Lord Milner's  
Committee*

The Government of the day rejected it. Lord Selborne, the Minister of Agriculture, told a meeting of agriculturists on 26th August, 1915, that in view of the favourable reports of the harvests in Canada and Australia, and of the unusually good harvest secured that year in Britain, and

*Lord  
Selborne's  
optimism*

“in view of the fact that it was borne in upon us as the struggle in the East of Europe developed that the call on agricultural labourers for the colours would be very heavy in the coming year ; in view of the difficulties with which the farmer would thereby be confronted ; in view of the superabundant harvest in Canada and Australia, and in view of the great financial stringency which will certainly prevail after the War, the Government decided that they would not incur the additional responsibility involved in the guarantee.”

At that period the submarine menace had begun temporarily to slacken down, as the Germans were frightened at the storms of protest raised among neutral nations by their campaign. For the next few months it continued to be at a low ebb, and the alarming heights to which it would rise in the autumn of 1916 were not foreseen. But everywhere in 1916 the seasons were bad. The total cereal crops of Canada, the United States and the Argentine were lower than those for 1915 by nearly 40,000,000 tons. The wheat yield in the United Kingdom fell off by over 400,000 tons. Add to this the sudden and ominous rise in the rate of submarine sinkings, and it will be seen that there was no ground left for complacent optimism.



I had always been concerned about our food supplies. In an earlier chapter of these Memoirs\*

*Appointment of Food Controller urged* I have described how the steadily growing shortage of food became in the course of 1916 a serious menace, and how Lord Crawford and I urged repeatedly on the Cabinet a programme of food production and the appointment of a Food Controller to supervise distribution. For long I had been of opinion—and still am—that with improved scientific knowledge of soil fertilization and productivity and with mechanical devices we could at least double the yield of our land. I had been in touch for years with the more enlightened agriculturists of the kingdom, and my conviction was based on their experience.

How the situation was viewed by a well-informed observer is shown by the following letter, written to me by one of the foremost of them, Sir Christopher Turnor, in November, 1916, a fortnight before I became Prime Minister :—

“ Stoke Rochford,  
Grantham,

23rd November, 1916.

. . . The question of the home production of food is becoming so serious that I beg leave to put before you a few considerations, knowing your deep interest in English agriculture. Our land is producing less than it did before the War, and in 1917 it will produce still less than in 1916.

*Sir Christopher Turnor's letter* Large areas are going out of cultivation. Before we know where we are we shall see a drop of between £300 and £400 millions in the capital

value of the land. This will be a great handicap in reconstruction and recuperation after the War.

The fundamental mistake has been that food has not been considered as a munition of war, and that the farm has not been treated as a munition factory. . . .

Had we at the outset come to terms with the farmers and told them definitely what to do, our situation to-day would have been very different.

Yours sincerely,

CHRISTOPHER TURNOR."

Yet our efforts to get this matter dealt with by the First Coalition were disregarded. It was not the fault of the Ministers of Agriculture, who did their best to draw attention to the danger and to urge strong action. Looking back on that period, one could

*A defeatist  
junta?*

almost imagine that a powerful junta within the Government had made up their minds that we could not win, and that the War must therefore be brought to an end as early as possible, and that for this reason they opposed any plans which might encourage its prolongation—failing to comprehend that an inevitable peace meant a bad peace. Maybe, however, it was just stupidity and inertia on their part. Let us give them the benefit of the doubt whichever plea is put in on their behalf.

When I formed my Administration in December, 1916, I was convinced that if this country should endure to victory, it was essential that both branches of the food problem—production and distribution—should be tackled vigorously and without delay. I therefore regarded the food problem as one of our most important concerns. Food production was

entrusted to Mr. Prothero, the Minister of Agriculture, and Sir Richard Winfrey, his Parliamentary Secretary. They were both men who had a thorough practical knowledge of agriculture in all its aspects. As to the distribution and rationing of supplies, I invited Lord Devonport to become the first Food Controller. It was a post for which his long and successful business training as a great food distributor, coupled with his experience in public administration, eminently fitted him. He was the architect of great commercial undertakings dealing with the supply of provisions. He had also been Chairman of the Port of London Authority from 1909. Before that he had been Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Trade since the end of 1905.

The office of Food Controller was one calling for definite executive ability of a high order. Here was no Department which would run smoothly under a mediocre head on the ball-bearings of an expert permanent staff of civil servants. Someone was needed who would on the one hand take firm and vigorous measures to ensure a sufficient food supply for the needs of the civil population, the armed forces of the Crown, and our Allies on the Continent; and on the other hand, would devise suitable measures of restriction and distribution to make a limited and seemingly inadequate supply stretch out over these demands. It was a double problem, each aspect involving stern interference with some of the most individualistic and conservative industries in the country. The first task involved close co-operation with the Board of Agriculture, Ministry of Shipping, Ministry of National Service and the War Office;

*Action of  
the new  
Government*

*Complex  
difficulties  
of new  
Department*

the second required a firm and tactful handling of the distributive trades and the general public. As far as distribution was concerned Lord Devonport was well qualified to cope with the complex issues involved.

I felt that as a pre-condition for success it was essential that we should take the public into our confidence by a frank revelation of the facts. It might give temporary encouragement to the enemy. This consideration always arose whenever it was a question of taking the public into your confidence. Sometimes in war there are weaknesses and defects which it is important a nation should keep from the enemy's knowledge, in so far as that is possible. That involves not revealing them to your own nationals. What is known to 46,000,000 people cannot be long preserved as a secret from the knowledge of the world. But if it is withheld from your own nation, then you cannot rouse national apprehension, zeal and energy in the task of remedying the deficiencies. To judge where the balance of advantage lies is one of the most perplexing and responsible tasks of statesmanship. In the matter of munitions I concluded that the advantage to be reaped from willing co-operation at home more than balanced the important drawback of cheering the foe by an exposure of facts of which they were already cognisant. I came to the same conclusion about our food supplies. I therefore gave a clear indication of the nature of these problems and of the methods by which we proposed to deal with them, in my first speech to the House as Prime Minister, on 19th December, 1916. In the course of that speech I said :—

*Need for  
public support  
for food  
control*

“ Now I feel I must say something about the food problem. It is undoubtedly serious, and will be grave unless not merely the Government but the nation is prepared to grapple with it courageously without loss of time. The main facts are fairly well known. The available harvests of the world have failed. Take Canada and the United States of America. As compared with last year the harvests were hundreds of millions of bushels down, and that means that the surplus available for sale abroad is diminished to an extent which is disastrous. In times of peace we can always make up the deficiency in any particular country by resorting to another. If America failed there was Russia or the Argentine. But the Argentine promises badly. Russia is not available. Australia means almost prohibitive transport. When we come to our own harvest, which is not a mean ingredient in the whole, not merely was the harvest a poor one, but, what is still more serious, during the time when the winter wheat ought to have been sown the weather was almost, if not altogether, impossible, and I do not believe that more than three-eighths of the usual sowing has taken place. Let us clearly understand what that means. Let us get to the bottom of it. Unless the nation knows what it means you cannot ask them to do their duty. It is true that to a certain extent you can make up by the spring sowing, but as any agriculturist knows, that never produces anything comparable to the winter sowing.

Those are the main features so far as the harvest is concerned. But we have also got the submarine menace to think of. Under these conditions, it

*My speech to  
the House*

*Decisions  
of the War  
Cabinet* Agriculture. The Cabinet reached the following conclusions. They have a bearing on the problems of to-day, for they represent an arrangement between producer and consumer where the interests of both are directly concerned.

(a) The first step to be taken is to define the respective spheres of responsibility of the Food Controller and the President of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries. Mr. Prothero and Lord Devonport undertook to confer with a view to framing an agreement on this subject, and to report the results of their conference to the War Cabinet.

(b) The principle of fixed prices for the 1917 harvest was approved. The details were left for agreement between the Food Controller and the President of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, who were invited, in the case of any difference of opinion, to lay the matter before the War Cabinet.

(c) If, after consultation, the Food Controller and the President of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries considered it desirable to extend the fixed price beyond the year 1917, the matter should again be brought before the War Cabinet.

(d) In order to maintain the production of milk at a fixed price, it was decided to include in the powers of the Food Controller authority over the prices of feeding-stuffs.

(e) The Food Controller and the President of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries must be empowered to incur the expenditure necessary for stimulating agricultural production in this country.

Put briefly, these resolutions meant that neither

precedent nor price was to be allowed to hinder the production of food for the people. There was no time to lose, for the increase in our home food supplies was not something which could be easily or rapidly achieved.

*Exceptional  
measures  
needed*

The harvest of 1916 had been poor ; cereal crops small, potatoes few and diseased. If food was scarce, labour, owing to injudicious recruiting, was scarcer. There was a shortage of fertilisers, feeding-stuffs and tractors. The land had been badly let down in labour and manure at a time when its help was needed more than ever. The prospect for 1917 was therefore worse than for 1916. Only exceptional measures could hold out a prospect of an increased food production, particularly as the shipping shortage and restriction of imports handicapped the supply of feeding-stuffs for animals and fertilisers for the soil.

An essential preliminary was to create an instrument suitable for carrying out our policy, and on 1st January, 1917, the Board of Agriculture established a Food Production Department, under the direction of Sir T. H. Middleton, to organise the expansion of tillage. The next step was to acquire appropriate powers, and on 10th January, 1917, a Regulation was issued by Order in Council, which gave the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries (and, in Scotland, the Board of Agriculture, Scotland) power to make Orders bearing on the better cultivation of agricultural land. The Regulation empowered the Board to take over any land which they considered was being inadequately cultivated, to commandeer any implements or farm stock required for food production, regulate the use of land and order the ploughing-up of grass-land, dispossess farmers that were not

*Food  
Production  
Department  
set up*

producing enough food from their land, and put someone else in charge. Food was a munition of war and in its production the national interest was asserted as paramount, and no vested interests or class privileges were to be allowed to stand in the way of the safety of the nation, or hamper its successful accomplishment of the terrible enterprise to which it had been committed by events. This Regulation was only the first of a series which we issued from time to time, authorising drastic measures to ensure land cultivation and food production.

These compulsory powers were essential as a weapon to be held in reserve for dealing with individual recalcitrants. But to secure a big food production drive for the 1917 harvest we had to enlist the goodwill and voluntary co-operation of the farmers in general.

Early in February, Mr. Prothero and I decided to call into our council to aid our food production the services of Sir Arthur Lee (now Lord Lee of Fareham), who had rendered us such notable assistance in the organisation of munitions. The Food Production Department set up at the beginning of January had already been considerably enlarged and developed. We now made it an independent Department, under a Director-General, responsible to the Minister, but otherwise unrelated to the Board of Agriculture. This post was offered by us to Sir Arthur Lee and in due course accepted by him. Prothero and Lee were an ideal combination for this undertaking. The former with his great agricultural experience, his tact, suavity and persuasive manner and speech; the latter bringing to his task the same persistence, energy and resource that he had already displayed in his work for the Ministry of Munitions, to

*Lord Lee's  
appointment*





The Rt. Hon. Lord Lee of Farcham.



which I have already referred elsewhere. The new Directorate became responsible for supplying agriculturists with labour, machinery and fertilisers, and for exercising the powers of control conferred by regulations under the Defence of the Realm Act to ensure the maximum production of food.

When his appointment was under consideration, it seemed to me that a lunch at Downing Street would be a suitable occasion to discuss the food problem with him and Prothero. As a result of our talk, Lee worked out his ideas in the form of a memorandum which was carefully considered by the Board of Agriculture, and in substance adopted by them. The resulting document was presented to me by Prothero on 14th February, and considered by the War Cabinet on the same afternoon. Its recommendations formed the basis of our food production policy for the remainder of the War.

*Lee's  
memorandum*

*Guaranteed  
prices  
approved*

After considerable discussion the War Cabinet decided to ensure the co-operation of the farming community by adopting a bold policy of guaranteeing minimum prices for wheat, oats and potatoes. The scales adopted were :—

For Wheat :

per quarter of 504 lb. 60s. in 1917  
55s. in 1918 and 1919  
45s. in 1920-21-22

For Oats :

per quarter of 336 lb. 38s. 6d. in 1917  
32s. od. in 1918 and 1919  
24s. od. in 1920-21-22

For Potatoes :

per ton £6 os. od. in 1917  
£4 10s. od. in 1918 and 1919

If the Government should commandeer produce during the first three years, it would give an undertaking to pay not less than 70s. for wheat, and 45s. for oats ; while for potatoes it would pay not less than £8 per ton in 1917 and £7 per ton in 1918 and 1919.

We further decided that “ as a part of a policy of guaranteed prices, the Government should secure a *Minimum Wage and Wage Boards* wage of 25s. a week\* to agricultural labourers during the period of the guarantee, and should make provision for the establishment of Wage Boards ; for compelling owners and tenants to make the best use of the land under their control ; and for preventing rents being raised during the period of the State guarantee, except in special cases, e.g., where the landowner himself pays tithe, such special cases to receive the sanction of the Board of Agriculture.” The powers were unprecedented and drastic. But so were the circumstances.

The policy outlined in these decisions : guaranteed prices ; guaranteed wages ; fixed rents ; and compulsory powers to secure good cultivation, was the policy pursued thereafter by the Government in its treatment of the farming community. Fixed rents, guaranteed wages and compulsory efficient cultivation were always regarded as essential concomitants of guaranteed prices.

A very important further discussion took place three days later, on 17th February. It was reported that the farmers who had been consulted were willing to pay a minimum wage of 25s. a week, if they were guaranteed a minimum price for their produce.

\* The average wages of an agricultural labourer in England before the War ranged from 12s. 9d. to 18s. a week. The general average can be put at about 14s. a week.

Lord Chaplin had called on me and expressed his support for the policy of the minimum price. He was pessimistic as to the prospect of increasing production in 1917, as the land required cleaning, and the farmer would not break up his grass-land until he got his guarantee. The interesting comment on the scheme made by Captain Bathurst, who stated that he represented in the House of Commons a constituency containing some of the worst-paid agricultural labourers in the country, was that among farmers there was an increasing appreciation of the probability that if the labourer were better paid he would give better work. The more enlightened were in favour of a Wage Board, because it would place all the farmers on an equal footing.

At this meeting we also discussed pheasants, and decided that the Board of Agriculture should take any measures necessary to prevent them from making inroads on our grain crops. The destruction of the crops by game in the vicinity of preserves has been treated as a joke by men who can afford to indulge in such humour. During the War, when food was scarce, it was a bad practical joke. The War had almost stopped the usual autumnal massacres of the pheasantry, and the result was that the ravages of the surplus birds were devastating. The Board was authorised to issue an Order empowering tenants to kill pheasants where the landowners had failed to keep them down. The War, which upset so many ancient landmarks, was here making inroads upon those sacred feudal relics, the English Game Laws. It is significant of the temper of the times that this rough interference with privileges which had been

*Farmers  
support  
minimum  
wage*

*War on  
pheasants*

guarded for centuries with jealous suspicion should have been passed and practised without audible murmur.

We reviewed and confirmed the decisions made three days earlier, but modified the proposals in regard to prices for commandeered produce in the direction of greater elasticity. Altogether it was a startling series of decisions to be taken by a Government in which there were several great landowners : restriction of rent by law—doubling the wages of the agricultural labourer—compulsory cultivation of land (even of parks !)—power for tenants to kill pheasants which ravaged their crops. While the discussion was going on and the decisions were being taken, Lord Balfour sat in quizzical silence. At last he looked at the clock and said : “ As nearly as I can reckon, we have had one revolution every half-hour ! ”

It remained to secure parliamentary sanction for our policy. I gave a preliminary description of it in the course of an extensive statement to the House of Commons on 23rd February, 1917, about the position of food and shipping. Urging the importance of home food production, I said :—

“ Twenty years after the Corn Laws were abolished in this country we produced twice as much wheat as we imported. . . . Since then four or five million acres of arable land have been converted into pasture, and about half the agricultural population—the agricultural labouring population—has emigrated abroad or into the towns. No doubt the State showed a lamentable indifference to the importance of the agricultural

*A revolution  
every half-  
hour*

*Policy  
announced  
to the  
Commons*

industry and to the very life of the nation, and that is a mistake which must never be repeated. No civilised country in the world spent less, or even so little on agriculture, either directly or indirectly, as we did. I ventured to call attention to this in 1909, but inasmuch as my statement was mixed up with a good deal of controversial matter, it was not in the least acceptable to the very people for whom it was designed. Between 70 and 80 per cent. of our staple cereal for consumption has been imported yearly, and at the present moment *I want the country to know our food stocks are low, alarmingly low—lower than they have been within recollection. . . . It is essential, therefore, for the safety of the nation . . . that we should put forth immediately every effort to increase production for this year's harvest and the next, and that we should do it immediately. . . .*"

I appealed for support for the hard work being done by the Minister of Agriculture, and indicated some of the features of the problem with which he was faced. The difficulties in the way of increasing cultivation, I pointed out, were not solely those caused by labour shortage, serious though this was. The greatest obstacle was the timidity of the farmer when it came to cutting up his pasture.

"He has been caught twice with too much arable land, and caught very badly—once in 1880 and the other time in 1890—and then he had years of anxiety, depression, and insolvency, his savings completely absorbed, and very often he himself for years waterlogged by debt. There is no memory as tenacious as that of the tiller of the soil, and the furrows are still in the agricultural mind. Those

years have given the British farmer a fright of the plough, and it is no use arguing with him. You must give him confidence, otherwise he will refuse to go between the shafts. . . .”

I recounted our reasons for believing that during the War and for two or three years afterwards agricultural prices were likely to remain high, and announced our intention of basing on that expectation a Government guarantee of minimum prices to the farmer. There were corollaries to this guarantee. Labour must also have a guaranteed minimum wage. Rents must not be raised. “There must not be any return to what happened during the Napoleonic wars. Then there was an enormous increase in prices ; and rents were practically doubled by the end of the war.” The landlords must not take advantage of a Government guarantee under which the State might lose money, to raise rents.

I then came to what was the most startling, and may yet turn out to be the most fruitful of these proposals, when its value to the community is appreciated.

“ Powers are to be given to the Board of Agriculture to enforce cultivation. It is obvious that it is an injustice to the community that a man should sit on land capable of producing food when he is either too selfish or too indolent to make the best use of it. So the Government must have the right, through the proper Department, to enforce cultivation in these cases.”

*Compulsory  
good  
cultivation*

I reviewed the price question, and announced the prices which had already been agreed to by the



Cabinet for wheat, oats and potatoes. And I appealed to the farming community, on the strength of this guarantee, to do their best to increase the 1917 harvest, and to make the best use of the time still available. Somewhat optimistically, as events in the last few years have shown, I declared that "the country is alive now as it has never been before to the essential value of agriculture to the community, and whatever befalls it will never again be neglected by a Government." It is still difficult to wean the urban population from a rooted habit of regarding the countryside as a picnicking ground, whose accessible amenities are restricted by fences and often destroyed by cultivation. They have not yet acquired a real comprehension of the essential importance of the land of the country to its security, its permanent prosperity and contentment.

The legislation foreshadowed in my speech was in due course brought forward in the form of the Corn  
*Corn* Production Bill, which was given its first  
*Production* reading on 5th April. The second  
*Bill* reading of this measure, on 24th and 25th  
*introduced* April, was carried by a majority of more than ten to one, but only after weathering fierce attacks by opponents as diverse as Sir Frederick Banbury, Mr. Runciman, Mr. R. D. Holt, and Mr. Ramsay MacDonald. The measure was in four parts. Part I contained the guarantee of minimum prices for corn, Part II minimum wages for land workers, Part III prohibited rent increases as a result of the guarantees, and Part IV made provision for control and enforcement of cultivation. All these four parts hung together, and as I have shown, they formed a necessary system for ensuring the production of more home-grown food. But each part, taken

separately, was of a nature to cause violent offence to the susceptibilities of one class or another of political thought. Mr. Runciman and those of his way of thinking intensely disliked the guaranteed price, which savoured of Protection or Bounties, or at least of a departure from the pure theory of Free Trade, of which he had and has been an intermittent champion and a recurrent adversary. The economic colours he wears depend on his political environment for the time being. He had then thrown off his Parisian blazer and was once more wearing his old Free Trade mantle. Wages boards were denounced by Mr. Holt, who declared in favour of *laissez faire* and perfect freedom of contract between employer and employed. He has always been in favour of leaving the hindmost to the devil in order to speed up the rest. Restrictions on the increase of rents roused the ire of Sir Frederick Banbury (now Lord Banbury), the only perfect specimen of the prehistoric man left in the economic world. He was naturally outraged by nearly everything in the Bill. The insistence on cultivation as a legal obligation stirred a wide range of prejudices, ornamental, artistic, sporting, traditional—every form and species of the human egotism which rebels against doing or submitting to things that inconvenience it or interfere with its rights, privileges and amenities.

Criticism was not confined to independent and opposition members. One of the members of the Government, Mr. Walter Long, viewed the measure with most profound distaste, and tried hard to get it dropped or postponed, so strongly did he disapprove of any control over the owners and occupiers of land.

*Objections  
to the  
measure*

*Mr. Long's  
criticisms*

I give a letter which I received from him in which he very forcibly states the case against the measure :—

“ . . . There is a very strong feeling among agriculturists of all classes that this Bill is being rushed, and there seems to me to be considerable justification for this view. . . .

The Board of Agriculture have taken powers under the Defence of the Realm Act for which, so far as I know, there is no precedent, and their application may easily lead to disastrous consequences. They have taken power to take the control of a man's land away from him ; to turn out the tenant and to compel men to cultivate their land in a manner entirely contrary to what they believe to be in the best interests of food production. They propose, as we understand it, to exercise these powers through certain Local Committees. So far as I know, there is no precedent for giving tremendous powers of this kind to any Local Authority, and I fully share the view that a wholly unfair advantage has been taken of the military situation to pass land legislation which would in quieter times be absolutely impossible.

If the policy is pursued, and sanctioned by Parliament, of entrusting Local Committees, not even composed necessarily of men elected in the locality, with compulsory powers to be exercised against their neighbours, the door is being opened wide to tyrannical action of the most serious character. To my own knowledge, steps of a very questionable character are already being taken in this direction, and I am very strongly of the opinion that the amendments which have been

*His letter*

inserted by Lord Lansdowne giving appeal in respect of policy ought to be accepted, and before the Cabinet refuse to do so I ask to be heard.

Representations have already been made to me in several quarters that this Bill is not the result of full consideration by a Cabinet composed of men representing the interests concerned. Whether this is so or not, of course I cannot say, as I have had nothing to do with the Bill from the beginning. I was present at the Cabinet when the present policy was decided, and I concurred, though with some reluctance, as regards parts of it.\*

I also unreservedly accepted the policy laid down in the two speeches made by you in the House of Commons and at the Guildhall, but this Bill is a wide departure from anything indicated by you on those occasions, and involves interference with the rights of property of the most grievous kind. I have no hesitation in expressing my disapproval, and must, of course, do so whatever the decision of the Government may be ; the fact that land legislation of the future is to be of this very drastic kind is causing a profound amount of irritation among men who have been among the most loyal and devoted supporters of the War from its very commencement."

I passed this letter over to a Conservative Minister for his views. He wrote me as follows in reply :—

" My dear Prime Minister,

It is really very hard to treat this tirade of Long's seriously. He is an awfully good fellow and

\* There were at least three large landowners present at the Cabinet meeting that considered the Bill and assented to its provisos.

a friend of mine. But he seems to me to lose his head rather easily, and he has certainly lost his head over this Bill.

*A Conservative  
comment on  
the letter*

This is the landlord's string of objections, to which I have been listening with patience for three days, in their most extreme form.

It is simply out of the question that the Government should, as he suggests, hang up the whole Bill, which is the central pillar of our whole Food Production Policy, now that we have by a considerable effort got it through both Houses, till October !

The only effect of such a piece of folly would be to give time for all their unreasonable opposition to gather head. Nobody would know where he stood, and the business, difficult enough in any case, of getting a larger quantity of land ploughed up *during the two or three months which are of crucial importance* would be fatally delayed.

I am sure you won't look at it for a moment. . . ."

When the Act was put into operation Mr. Long gave trouble. Although he was a member of the Government, he aspired to play the part of a passive resister.

As this correspondence shows, the opponents of the Bill were supported by a small group of men who could not appreciate the truth that when a nation resorts to war, the traditional privileges of its citizens must give way to the public safety, and that the ordinary laws which guarantee the ordinary attributes of possessive right and amenity must remain silent. At the time this matter of increased food production was absolutely vital. Victory hung on

*National  
interest  
must  
override  
privilege*

it. Our people were bearing wonderfully well the strain of the prolonged War, and the cheerless military position. But if something near to starvation had assailed them and their children, the firmness of the home front might have crumbled. There were no very rosy prospects abroad to help the nation to endure acute privation at home cheerfully. Our failure to apply a more intelligent strategy had left us in a position where it became a case of holding on until one side or the other should crack. The realisation that our casualties were appalling and that results were not commensurate with sacrifices, together with the fact of the Russian Revolution, combined to create a feeling of uneasiness, especially in the industrial areas. The stories told by the crippled soldiers who had returned home from abroad constituted formidable anti-war propaganda. If hunger had visited every home the consequences might have been as serious here as they now were in Russia and afterwards became in Germany.

The powers we secured under the Corn Production Act and under the various Regulations issued under the Defence of the Realm Acts now gave *Administrative powers and machinery created* us authority to insist on a big increase in cultivation of the soil ; and this on terms which secured the willing co-operation of the bulk of the agricultural community, landowners, farmers and labourers. The Food Production Department and the organisation, central and local, which it built up in concert with the Ministries of Food and of Agriculture, furnished us with an instrument for carrying through our programme. But there were other serious fences to be cleared in our course. Chief among these were the shortage of labour and of fertilisers.

The problem of agricultural labour might well have been expected to defy solution. For years before the War the countryside had steadily been depopulated, and its landworkers reduced to a minimum. When the War broke out, there was a rush of village lads to the colours. The Army exercised a twofold suction upon farm workers. In the first place, these country-bred men included a much higher average of A category recruits than did the urban workers reared in the slummy and unhealthy back streets of our smoke-poisoned cities. So the military representatives cast covetous eyes on these sturdy sons of the soil, and took every opportunity to slip them into khaki. And in the second place, the wages earned by landworkers were so meagre that army pay, plus family allowance, had an attraction for them which it did not hold out to the well-paid munition worker or city employee. Moreover, the industry was not organised to counteract this allurements. Its workers were not combined in strong trade unions that would defend their members, and the farmers had no federation comparable in its strength to those of the great manufacturing industries. Whatever influence the Agricultural Labourers' Union or the National Farmers' Union may exercise over Governments to-day, in those days it was negligible.

Thus by 1917 there was far less than the normal pre-War labour force available on the land. And with this decimated army we were proposing to carry out arable cultivation on a scale which had not been attempted for decades.

The thing seemed impossible. Nevertheless, it was achieved. The romance of that triumphant struggle against war and weather, and, not least, against the

stubborn prejudices of the countryside, cannot be fully told here. I can only pause to summarise a few of its leading features.

*Achieving the impossible*

There was first the problem of manual labour. The Army had already absorbed a high proportion of our agricultural workers, and still thirsted impatiently for more. At the beginning of

1917, the War Office notified Mr. Neville Chamberlain, the new Director of National Service, that during the first

*Army demands more men*

three months of the year they would require a further 350,000 recruits of category A, as well as 100,000 men of categories B and C. On such terms we had to make up the price for our "victories" on the Somme, and prepare to pay for fresh victories of the same kind, decreed by the military conclave at Chantilly. All industries, however vitally important, had to pay their tribute, agriculture among them. The agricultural quota was fixed at 30,000 men.

The War Cabinet considered this problem, but could find no way of evading the sacrifice. So we decided that an effort should be made to find substitutes for these from among home defence units and surplus recruits, and reinforce them by withdrawing men from gardening and similar occupations, by securing women for land work, and increasing the mobility of labour. We also turned our thoughts to an increase of mechanical appliances for cultivation.

One interesting matter was raised at this discussion. Lord French had pointed out that he could only supply men for agricultural work from his Home Defence forces at the cost of impairing his capacity to resist an enemy raid on our coasts, and the War



Cabinet formally decided to relieve him of responsibility by itself taking the decision to authorise the action. The "risk of a raid" was the

*The risk  
of a raid*

scare raised at that time by the Admiralty as to the danger of a German landing on our shores. This, the oldest and most profitable bogey in the armoury of our fighting services, is always brought out, dusted, and repainted in flaming red whenever the Generals and Admirals want to retain or increase their estimates of men, money or machinery. For a century the

*An old  
bogey*

old bogey was dressed in French uniform. For a generation it has been German.

The Army now wanted more men, so the Admirals co-operated by saying that they could give no guarantee of being able to prevent the enemy from throwing a force of 160,000 men into England at any time, nor could the Grand Fleet begin to interrupt such an operation until 24 hours or more after the German flotillas appeared off our coasts. It was a sorry exhibition of nervous impotence on the part of the Lord High Admirals of the biggest Navy in the world, by Admirals who were not ashamed to own that they could not get near enough to the coast of Flanders to bombard its submarine refuges without imperilling their warships and who avowed their helplessness to check these submarines. It was obvious that if Germany, without securing the command of the sea, sent such an expeditionary force and if it actually succeeded in getting ashore with its equipment, it would forthwith be cut off by land and sea, compelled to capitulate, and the troopships that conveyed the troops with the flotillas that protected them would be sunk or captured. So the War Cabinet declined to take this attack of nerves

too seriously, and Lord French accepted our view that the likelihood of such a raid was extremely remote. The Government held that our need for increased food production was much more real and urgent than the need to hold large forces in readiness to deal with a threadbare fantasy. The provision of farm labour from army sources was therefore duly authorised.

Another source of labour was available in the prisoners of war. This was beset with the twofold difficulty that on the one hand the *Using prisoners of war for the harvest* military authorities insisted on very stringent regulations in regard to their use, to avoid the risk of their escaping, and that on the other hand British farmers were at first very reluctant to avail themselves of this unfamiliar form of assistance. Only by slow degrees was war-prisoner labour introduced; but it proved so satisfactory that the countryside prejudice against it disappeared, and the War Office presently realised that the danger of prisoners escaping was small. As a matter of fact, they showed no eagerness to escape. By the end of 1917, only one officer and two men had actually made good their escape from the country, and accordingly the Cabinet then decided to relax the conditions under which German prisoners were employed by farmers, and leave their surveillance to the local police. By the autumn of 1918, no fewer than 30,000 German prisoners of war were employed on the British countryside, helping us to gather in our harvest.

But the recruit to our agricultural labour force who attracted the liveliest interest was undoubtedly the land girl. Her aid, too, was at first pressed on the farmers in the teeth of a good deal of sluggish

and bantering prejudice and opposition. When in 1915 the Board of Agriculture tried to induce the farming community to employ female labour—the “lilac sunbonnet brigade,” as they were jocularly hailed in some quarters—it met at first with very little success. There was of course work that had long been done by women on family farms—milking, butter making, poultry keeping, haymaking and the like. But the idea that women could do the ordinary work of a farm called forth bucolic guffaws. This crude merri-  
*The land girl* ment roused the ire of the sex, and when a member of the Launceston Board of Guardians publicly declared that women could not do certain forms of farm work, they challenged his statement in the Press, and eight competitors turned up for a public demonstration at which they efficiently carried out all the major operations of a farm. This was in March, 1916, and it aroused such interest that a month later a county demonstration was held at Truro, where 43 female competitors appeared and performed seven types of farm work, including harnessing and driving horses in waggons, ploughing, manure spreading and potato planting. The work chosen as a test was all of a kind only to be performed by skilled and sturdy labourers. One of the judges wrote afterwards :—

*Women demonstrate their farming skill*

“Some of the work was very well done indeed. The dung-spreading and planting were excellent ; and the way in which several of the competitors handled the horses in the harrowing and in the waggons was a surprise to many of the spectators. . . . I should like to see some of the

men who have been cheaply sneering at the ploughing have a try themselves.”\*

Still, it took another year to reconcile farmers to this innovation. But at last the really efficient performance of women on the land, of which the Launceston demonstration gave a sample, slowly won them acceptance and recognition by the farmers.

With a view to our big food production drive, we determined to make a more considerable use of this source of land labour, and in January, 1917, the Board of Agriculture set up a Women’s Branch, which in March was transferred to the Food Production Department. It set to work to organise women’s labour for the farms. This was divided into two classes—casual or part-time work by women in the villages, who could not leave their homes but could help with farm work ; and the recruitment of a Land Army of girls and women who would give full-time service and go wherever they were sent.

Of the first type of labour there had always been a fair volume employed. The 1911 Census showed 70,000 women engaged in agriculture. But by means of women’s County Committees a greatly increased number were drawn into service, and in 1918 the returns indicated that some 230,000 village women and girls were working on the land in England and Wales.

The recruiting of the Land Army was begun early in 1917 by the National Service Ministry, and then worked jointly by the Ministry of Labour and the Food Production Department. The terms offered at the outset by the Government to recruits included a month’s free training at one of the 600 training

\* Middleton, “ Food Production in War,” p. 143.

centres which we arranged on farms where accommodation could be provided ; an outfit ; a minimum wage of 18s. a week (as compared with the pre-War average wage in England of 14s. a week to men workers) ; and maintenance at the depots while unemployed.

*Recruiting  
the Land  
Army*

It was of course very important that the new Land Army should create a good impression in the early days, to counteract the general hostility and distrust of the farming community ; and the first recruits were most carefully selected. Out of 47,000 applicants who turned up in the first rush, only 7,000 were accepted.

Of the various labour resources applied to agriculture during the War—soldier ploughmen and labour battalions drawn from the home defence forces, prisoners of war, unskilled urban substitutes for farm workers called to the colours—the land girl was certainly the most picturesque figure, and perhaps in some ways the most valuable.

*Value of  
the Land  
Girl*

Breeched, booted and cropped, she broke with startling effect upon the sleepy traditionalism of the English countryside.

She was drawn from a wide range of classes of society, and while as in every large collection of human beings there were included good, bad and indifferent specimens, her general average was high. She brought with her an eager enthusiasm and energy, an alert and unprejudiced mind, that stimulated by example the activity of the men workers.

But when all such sources had been tapped, we could not command anything like enough manual labour to carry through a big increase in cultivation by traditional farming methods, or even maintain cultivation at its previous level. If we were to

achieve our big drive, the Government saw clearly that we should have to resort to labour-saving machinery on a large scale, supplementing our limited man-power with the power of petrol and steam.

*Mechanising  
agriculture*

Here we were up against a twofold difficulty. On the one hand, we had not got the tractors. On the other, the farmers were not at all eager to have them. At that time the agricultural tractor was hardly known in the English countryside, and was regarded with grave suspicion by the farming community as a new-fangled contraption with no manurial utility. Steam ploughing tackle they were in some districts more familiar with ; but of the 500 sets which existed in the country, nearly half were idle, as their engine drivers had left for the Army or for munition factories, and many of the sets were out of repair.

*Prejudice  
against  
tractors*

Great numbers of farm tractors were needed for ploughing and other tillage operations. These we had either to make in this country or import from America. Lack of shipping made it appear desirable to manufacture them here ; but as the firms capable of the work were already fully occupied on munitions and motor transport for the Army, the prospect of getting them to manufacture tractors was gloomy.

At this stage Mr. Henry Ford came to our aid. He was anxious to establish a motor factory in Ireland, and offered, if granted permission and facilities for this, to use the factory during the War for the purpose of making agricultural tractors. The project was sanctioned by the War Cabinet, but was held up through difficulty in securing the necessary structural materials for building the factory. Mr. Ford then

*Help of  
Mr. Ford*

came to our help in another way. In April, 1917, he offered to present his "Fordson" tractor to the British Government as a model, together with all drawings, patterns, jigs, etc., needed for its production, free of cost, on condition that the tractors manufactured therefrom should be purchased by the Government, not by private individuals. Arrangements were put in hand to take advantage of this offer, and for 6,000 of the tractors to be manufactured here for us by British firms; but early in June, 1917, we found it necessary to concentrate our motor manufacturing resources on the output of aeroplanes, and all these arrangements went by the board. Ultimately half of the 6,000 Ford tractors were assembled here at a new factory run up at Trafford Park for the purpose, the parts being supplied by Mr. Ford from his American factory. The remainder were imported complete across the Atlantic.

In addition to these 6,000 Ford tractors, the Food Production Department were responsible for securing some 3,262 tractors of other makes. They also hunted out all the sets of steam ploughing tackle in the country, traced their missing engine drivers, and secured the return of some 300 of these from the Army. Further sets to the number of 65 were procured from a British firm.

As an illustration of the achievements of the mechanical power thus made available for our food production campaign, I may say that in the preparations for the 1918 harvest, motor tractors carried out tillage operations equivalent to the ploughing of about 600,000 acres, and the steam tackle ploughed and cultivated about 1,200,000 acres.

*Achievements  
of farm  
machinery*

Motor and steam power represented only one

aspect of the very great resort which we made to mechanical aids in our campaign. The Ministry of Munitions was called on to furnish every kind of improved agricultural implement which would save labour and assist mass production from the soil.

*Large numbers  
of implements  
provided*

Among these may be mentioned such items as 1,000 potato diggers, 5,000 self-binders, more than 3,000 cultivators, and many thousands of harrows, disc harrows, rollers, seed drills, two-furrow ploughs and similar implements. The effect of that wartime campaign was to raise permanently the standard of British farming in respect of mechanical equipment—and seeing the extreme difficulties with which farming has been faced since the War, it was fortunate for it that it was launched on these lean years with at least a more efficient and up-to-date equipment; for despite this advantage agriculture has since then been hard put to it to avoid utter insolvency.

The fertiliser shortage was yet another obstacle to be overcome. This was a difficulty which had confronted us since the outbreak of the War, but it was of course made much more serious when we proposed to effect a vast increase in the cropping area.

*The  
fertiliser  
problem*

The principal artificial manures purchased by farmers here in pre-War days were potash, nitrates and phosphates, the latter two being far the more important. Nine-tenths of the total expenditure before the War on artificials went on nitrates and phosphates. Potash was, however, considered essential for certain crops, notably potatoes. Unfortunately we depended entirely on Germany for our supplies. Despite various experiments, we failed to obtain any considerable output during the War



from home sources, and were latterly somewhat handicapped by the lack of this chemical.

As for nitrates, their most popular source before the War was imported nitrate of soda. But munition manufacture combined with the growing shortage of shipping to cut down supplies. Such nitrate as could be imported was wanted for explosives. Accordingly the Acland Committee on Fertilisers, set up by the Ministry of Agriculture in October, 1915, under the chairmanship of Mr. (now Sir Francis) Acland, had to face the difficult task of persuading farmers to use the unfamiliar sulphate of ammonia, which had for years been produced in large quantities at our gas works as a by-product, and exported abroad to appreciative foreigners, who knew its great value as a fertiliser. The Acland Committee carried out useful though tedious spadework in this educational field, and by the time their functions were transferred to the Ministry of Food at the end of 1916, farmers were slowly beginning to use sulphate of ammonia. The Ministry stimulated a larger use of this ingredient. The growth of the habit is shown by the figures for consumption of this fertiliser in the last three years of the War :—

1916 . . . .	75,000 tons
1917 . . . .	150,000 tons
1918 . . . .	230,000 tons

The provision of phosphatic manures was handicapped by the fact that there was not a convenient home supply of soluble phosphates. Our superphosphate of lime was made by treating imported phosphatic rock with acid, and imports

meant shipping, of which we had all too little available. We prohibited the export of basic slag, and the Fertilisers Branch set up at the Ministry of Munitions worked with the Food Production Department to secure the maximum amount possible of super-phosphate. These efforts were highly successful, for by the 1918 tillage about 770,000 tons of this manure were provided—a larger quantity than had been used annually before the War. In face of the difficulties to be surmounted this was a remarkable achievement.

*Phosphates*

It is clear evidence of the restless zeal and energy with which the Food Production Department and the bodies associated with its efforts in the Ministry of Munitions and among some agricultural organisations pursued their task of getting supplies of fertilisers for farmers, that while in 1918 far more land was put under the plough than had been the case in pre-War years, the yield per acre of this increased area was considerably higher than the pre-War average.

In this manner we obtained the powers, set up the administrative machinery, collected the labour, and produced the equipment, the tools and the fertilisers for our great food-growing effort. It remains to summarise the progress of the campaign and its results.

The spring of 1917 remained exceptionally cold and wet till after mid-April, but then a spell of very favourable weather set in, and with the aid of soldiers and with our organisation of machinery the land was ploughed and sown. The severe frosts had given a good tilth for agricultural operations which aided the work. When the preliminary crop returns

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came in, we were gratified to learn that our hard push was proving successful in getting more land into arable cultivation. Some 975,000 more acres were put under the plough in 1917 than in 1916. Seeing that at the beginning of 1917 it was estimated that the sowing as yet carried out for the 1917 harvest was at least 15 per cent. below that carried out by the corresponding date for the 1916 harvest, the increase eventually compassed was a notable achievement.

*Achievements  
of 1917  
campaign*

The corn crop was of rather poor yield in England and Wales, but fair in Scotland and Ireland. Potatoes cropped better in all countries than they had done the previous year. As compared with 1916, the quantities of produce in 1917 were greater by :—

*Yield of  
crops*

4,928,000 bushels of wheat ;  
5,120,000 bushels of barley ;  
36,700,000 bushels of oats ;  
41,813,000 sacks of potatoes.

These figures show that despite inevitable war deficiencies in labour, machinery and fertilisers, a truly remarkable beginning had been made with the task of increasing our home-grown food supplies. In addition, the growing army of allotment holders had also been highly successful with their potato and vegetable plantings.

The achievement was a very substantial relief to our overstrained shipping resources. I can hardly describe the relief the figures brought to anxious minds who knew that the battle had resolved itself into a struggle of endurance, and that at the end of

1916 and in the early spring of 1917 it had looked like turning against this country. When I received the statistics of increased production of food, and of shipbuilding, and the returns of diminishing sinkings of our ships which showed that we had checked the submarine depredations, I had a sense that the Allied cause was at last definitely on top, and could not be displaced from that position except by some prodigious act of folly perpetrated by our military leaders. I knew, too, that the food production achieved in so short a time gave promise of infinitely greater results next year.

*The corner  
turned*

In this I was not disappointed. The full effect of the work done by the Food Production Department could not be realised until the 1918 harvest. Long preliminary planning was clearly necessary to ensure any extensive inroad upon the permanent pasture of this country, and to secure good cultivation of land that was being neglected.

*Planning  
the 1918  
campaign*

That programme was set out as early as 7th May, 1917, in a memorandum giving the findings of a Conference of the Agricultural Departments of England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Sir Arthur Lee started forthwith to organise the measures for carrying it out. He sent a circular letter to the Agricultural Committee in every county, showing the total area of corn crops suggested for 1918 ; the additional acreage this represented compared with 1916 ; the estimated acreage of permanent grass to be broken up ; and the percentage of the total arable area of 1918 that would be devoted to corn crops if the programme were carried out in its entirety. These

*Grass-land  
to be  
broken up*

figures were given for each county separately, as well as for the country as a whole. The letter pointed out that it was important for the County Executive Committees to secure as much as possible of their county quotas by agreement, and only to resort to compulsion if all other means failed.

On the whole, these allocations of quota were well received, and the Department then proceeded to recommend the County Executives to set up at least three sub-committees to deal with Labour, Machinery, and Supplies, with the necessary officers and clerks. In most cases these appointments were made before the beginning of the 1917 harvest. A further step in the organisation of the campaign was the division of each county into districts, with district sub-committees in each, forming the final link between the Food Department and the individual farmer.

These sub-committees had the task of investigating and reporting to the County Executives on such matters as :—

Land in the district that was not being put to its best use for the national food supply.

Grass-land that should be ploughed up.

Labour shortage, and the kinds of labour needed.

Difficulties in obtaining supplies of seeds, manures, and other requisites.

They were also charged with the supervision of the work of tractors, steam tackle, horse teams, and gangs of prisoners. They had to keep the farmers informed of the credit facilities we had arranged for them. They were responsible for organising measures against rabbits, rats, rooks, wood-pigeons and other dangers

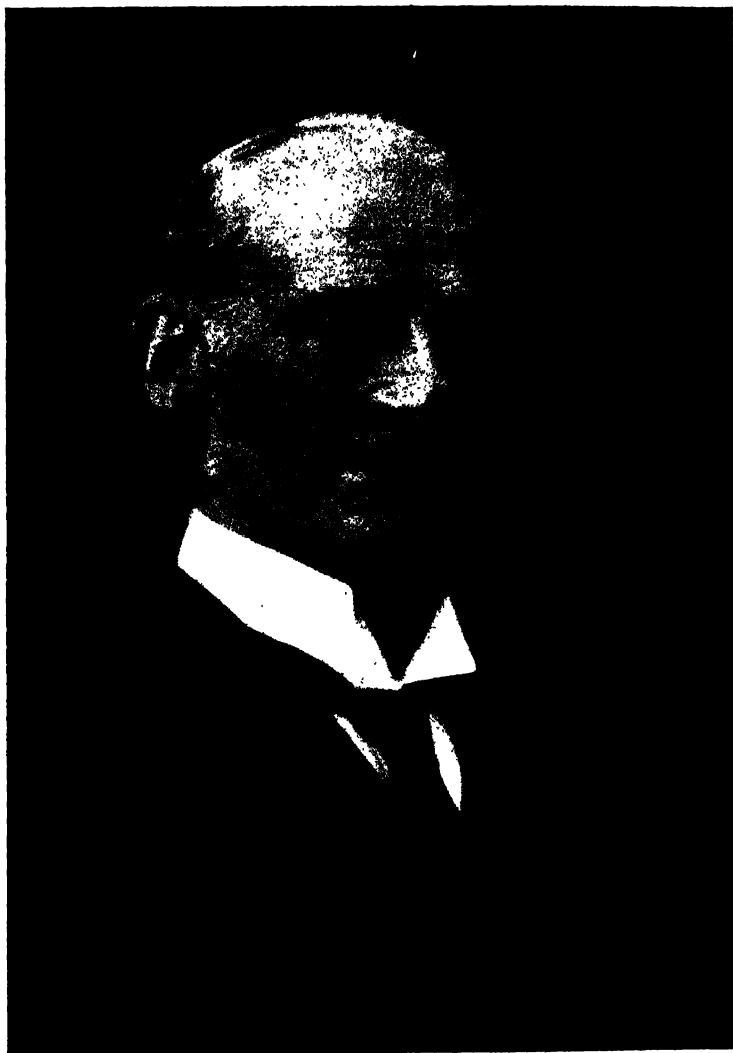
to the crops ; for reporting bad drainage ; and for assisting allotment holders and seeing that they cultivated their plots well. They

*A land  
survey*

rendered very valuable service in carrying out a survey of the land throughout the Kingdom, to ascertain its state of cultivation and what room there was for improvement. This survey was carefully planned in advance by a member of the Land Valuation Staff created under the 1909-10 Budget. Maps were prepared on which every field was shown, and particulars about it could be entered up by the district sub-committees. This kind of work, extended over the country, gave a most valuable picture of our potential resources, and enabled the preparations for the 1918 harvest to be planned on a sound basis.

By this means we learned in October, 1917, through a special return from the County Executive Committees, that the programme for breaking-up of grass-land was making very uneven progress in different parts. It was hampered by the shortage of skilled ploughmen. Of 21,500 ploughmen whom the Army had undertaken to supply, only 13,000 had been forthcoming, and most of these turned out to be not really skilled. Only 2,500 knew how to plough ! The fact was that Passchendaele was playing havoc with our side of the war of attrition. With its effect on our available man-power in France I deal elsewhere. Here at home it was crippling our food programme. The military chiefs scoffed at the idea that the final issue was being fought in Britain's ploughed fields and on the high seas that surround our islands. Every young ploughman snatched was to them a recruit. In reality he was a casualty before

*Shortage of  
ploughmen  
hampers  
progress*



*(Photo: Elliot & Fry.)*

The Rt. Hon. Lord Ernle.





he fell on the battlefield, for he was missing from the front where his services were most needed in the struggle.

It was now too late to proceed with the breaking-up of the heavier clay lands where this had been left undone. So we had to modify our programme. That meant that if we were to get as much land under the plough as we proposed, we should have to encroach on other grass which we had formerly intended to leave alone.

We therefore appealed to all farmers who had any available labour to break up their good grass-land for the national service. The spirit in which this appeal was made is well illustrated by a speech delivered at Darlington on 5th October, 1917, by Mr. Prothero to a meeting of agriculturists. It is an admirable specimen in its clarity and persuasive point of the appeal directed to cultivators, owners and public. Basing his remarks upon the supreme purpose of winning the War, he pointed out the ways in which our agriculture could assist in the task.

*The  
programme  
modified*

“ . . . First as to bread. The more corn that we can grow in this country, the better able we shall be to feed our people, and the less we shall be forced to buy abroad, the more money we shall keep in these islands, the more ships we shall set free to bring over those raw materials of manufacture on which millions of townsmen depend for their livelihood. . . . It is not a question of policy : it is a matter of necessity—the necessity for essential food in the midst of war and its consequences.

*Mr. Prothero's  
speech at  
Darlington*

. . . We took the acreage under the plough

in 1872. . . . In effect we say to the farmers in each county, 'This is what you were doing 45 years ago when we were less dependent on the foreigner. Take the figures as your goal ; get as close to it as you can ; make a real, strenuous effort, for the times are critical and the need great.' . . . To attempt 'equality of sacrifice' is only to make worse inequalities. The 'same for all' sounds well in theory ; in practice it works unfairly. Whether a man should be asked to plough at all, and, if so, how much, is a question which can only be settled on the spot, in view of the nature of the soil, the quality and condition of the grass, the balance of the farm, the necessity of fencing, the farmer's equipment in buildings and implements, or his experience of tillage, and a variety of other considerations. . . . The corn is badly wanted ; and few farmers, I am confident, will refuse an extra effort and even some sacrifice for the nation's good, provided that they are not asked to do something which they regard as foolish. . . ."

Mr. Prothero went on to speak of the help the Government was seeking to provide for farmers ; of guaranteed prices ; of seeds, fertilisers, implements, horses, and labour. "From the London Metropolitan Police Force alone we have got 120 skilled ploughmen."

*Police  
ploughmen* He mentioned the training establishments set up to train soldiers and women workers ; the arrangements to secure fertilisers ; the powers taken to deal with drainage, whereby many thousands of acres were being brought into profitable cultivation. Some 4,500 German prisoners were being employed in drainage works.

In regard to the milk problem, he urged milk farmers to maintain their maximum production. "I know well enough that the labour difficulties of this branch of the industry are greater than in any other branch of it, but none the less stick to it in the dogged spirit of the men who are fighting for us by sea and land." He dealt with the question of the fixed price of milk, and pointed out that if those farmers who found these unprofitable would copy some of the economies in feeding, and in the selection of good cows, adopted by those who were making milk production pay well, they would overcome their difficulties.

*Economy  
in milk  
production*

"Some dairy farmers must go out of business, or live on their capital, or alter their methods. The only changes of method which will do any good are either to economise in food without reducing the yield of milk or to increase the yield of milk per cow. To do either in ordinary times is the farmers' own affair. But in war time to do one or the other is a duty."

Passing to the question of meat, Mr. Prothero urged the importance of pressing on with winter feeding to maintain the supply of fat stock, and said that as the supply of cake was limited, the farmers should use what could be provided for them chiefly in feeding up the cattle of two years and upwards and reduce consumption when these beasts were exhausted, if meat imports could not supply the deficiency. He also discussed the question of manures, and the position in regard to sheep and pigs.

*Meat policy*

There was a fine response to these appeals on the part of the farmers. We for our part used all our efforts and persistence to get them the labour they needed. We even managed at the end of 1917, when Passchendaele was over, to get the Army in France to send back 1,500 ploughmen from the ranks for a three months' furlough. With these and

*A great  
agricultural  
drive*

German prisoners of war and more land girls and hands from the towns, and an increasing output of tractors we did what we could to eke out the scanty supply of agricultural labour. The spring weather of 1918 was very fine and favourable, and farmers, eager to break up grass-land and plant crops, were clamouring for workers. Then came the German break-through in March, and as a consequence of it, we had to decide in April to claim 30,000 more men from agriculture for the Army !

Happily, by this time the work of preparation for the 1918 harvest was well ahead. The achievements of the autumn campaign and appeal had been remarkable, as is shown by an extract from a letter written to me by Sir Arthur Lee, the Director-General of the Food Production Department, on 15th March, 1918 :—

*Lee's report  
on its  
success*

“ . . . It relates to *Winter Wheat* only, and shows by far the greatest increase ever recorded. The actual percentage of increase over last year's (1917) *Winter wheat* is 45 per cent., and 31 per cent. over *both* winter and spring wheat combined.

The figures are not conjectural estimates, but are based upon actual and compulsory individual returns from every farmer in the country. . . .”

The work thus well begun in the autumn was carried on in the spring with the utmost energy, despite all difficulties. Every fit man, and nearly every unfit man in the countryside was out and at work whenever the weather made farming operations possible. On 21st May, 1918, Sir Arthur Lee wrote me a letter accompanying his *Interim Report on the campaign* Report on the results of the Food Production Campaign, 1917-1918, in which he remarked: "I hope you will find them satisfactory. At any rate, they wipe out the losses of 40 years in 15 months."

The Interim Report gave results of a Census of 27th April, 1918, covering England and Wales, which showed the total acreage under corn and potatoes to be larger by 2,142,000 acres than the 1916 level. There was an increase in the acreage under each cereal crop, and in that under potatoes. The wheat area was the highest recorded since 1882; that for oats the highest on record by 20 per cent.; that for potatoes, also the highest on record, by 27 per cent.

The increase in the tillage area was, of course, still greater, because crop rotation compelled a good deal of arable land to be under other crops. The report stated that :—  
*Increase in tillage area*

"... It is estimated that a total addition of not less than 2,500,000 acres to the tillage area of England and Wales (as compared with 1916) has now been made.

The foregoing figures indicate that the total acreage in the United Kingdom under wheat, barley and oats, in 1918, will be the highest ever recorded in the history of British agriculture.

The acreage under potatoes will be the greatest since 1872. Particulars of other crops are not yet available. . . .

Reckoned in tonnage, the *net* saving in shipping resulting from the increased production of corn and potatoes, in England and Wales alone, should amount in the coming year to 1,500,000 tons."

The report added that these figures took no account of the increased production from allotment gardens, of which there were upwards of 800,000 more now than before the War. These might be reckoned to be producing food-stuffs to a total of 800,000 tons above the normal.

This agricultural achievement, it was pointed out, was accomplished in spite of the fact that after reckoning all the military and prisoner labour furnished by the Government, there had been 200,000 fewer male labourers on the land than in the year before the War.

The Agricultural Returns for the year 1918 ultimately showed that the total area in the United Kingdom diverted from grass to arable cultivation was 3,381,000 acres. And the actual realised yields of cereals and potatoes showed a most remarkable and gratifying advance upon those secured in the 1917 harvest. The crop yields in the two successive seasons were as follows :—

*The agri-  
cultural returns  
for 1918*

<i>Figures in Tons.</i>			
CROP.	1917.	1918.	<i>Increase.</i>
Wheat ..	1,757,000	2,579,000	822,000
Barley ..	1,359,000	1,540,000	181,000
Oats ..	3,632,000	4,461,000	829,000
Potatoes ..	8,604,000	9,223,000	619,000

The increase achieved was very striking and immensely valuable. The wheat crop in England and Wales exceeded the average of the last ten years before the War by 59.3 per cent., and the oat crop was similarly greater by 38.5 per cent., and potatoes by 59.2 per cent. For the United Kingdom as a whole, the wheat crop of 1918 was 64.9 per cent. greater than the pre-War average. The 1918 harvest was in fact by far the greatest that has been secured in this country for over the past sixty years.

*Greatest harvest for sixty years*

It would have been far greater still if the weather in the latter part of 1918 had lived up to its early promise. But the early summer was cold and dry. July was very wet, with some damage to crops through the heavy storms. August brought favourable weather in the South of England, where the bulk of the harvest was secured in good season and condition, but September was again very wet, and in the Midlands and North, in Scotland and Ireland, the harvest season turned out to be one of the very worst on record. The corn could not be carried, and a great deal of it sprouted in the fields. Heroic efforts were made to save it. In the crisis, the Home Defence Force was called on for every available man, and the landworkers, reinforced by the help of some 70,000 soldiers and 30,000 prisoners of war, were out whenever weather permitted, aided by all the mechanical resources—tractors, reapers and binders, and so on—that the efforts of the Food Production Department could provide. More than four-fifths of the largest harvest of modern times was thus rescued in the teeth of one of the worst seasons imaginable. If the achievements of the winter and spring sowing

*Weather handicap on harvest*

and planting had been magnificent, still more magnificent was the triumph of harvesting.

Had Germany carried out our programme of cultivation and rationing, the acute food shortage which provoked revolution and disintegrated the army would not have occurred.

It was the climax of our efforts for home food production. When in the spring of 1918 the programme for the 1919 harvest came to be planned, it was clear that much of the arable which had been so strenuously worked in the last years must now be given a rest unless it was heartened with fertilisers. Of these there was no adequate supply available. Production could therefore only be maintained at the 1918 level if half a million fresh acres could be brought under the plough, to replace land which would have to be let down to rotation grasses or bare fallow. The Food Production Department put forward a programme for ploughing up a further 550,000 acres of "relief land" in order to maintain the corn acreage. But the most convenient grass-land for such a purpose had already been taken, and the carrying out of this further programme would have made inroads upon the remaining pastures, which the farmers would have strongly resented. Any hope of securing their willing concurrence was destroyed by the fact that the German attack in March, 1918, compelled us to call on agriculture to provide a further 30,000 of its fit young men for the Army. The demand was unavoidable. The age limit had been raised, and the age at which recruits were sent to the fighting line had to be lowered. In spite of the urgent demands for coal and munitions,

*Reaction  
in 1919*

*Obstacles to  
ploughing  
more grass-land*



miners and munition workers were being similarly combed. But the withdrawal of more men from the land broke the farmers' spirit. They were already finding it intolerably difficult to keep their cultivation going, and it proved impossible to take away their best men and at the same time call on them to plough up their best pastures.

So when the Corn Production (Amendment) Bill, 1918, was introduced, to give the Food Production Department further powers of compulsion to secure the breaking-up of grass-land, Parliament met it with lively opposition.

*Opposition  
to 1919  
programme*

Taken as a whole, the agricultural experiment had produced results which definitely helped the nation through a crisis. This fact, however, did not mollify critics who were suffering from a sense of personal grievance or affront to their personal dignity.

The orders issued for breaking up the land were not always acceptable. Although in the main the selection was fair and prudent, there must have been occasions when the choice was doubtful and some perhaps where it was definitely unwise. The instruments used for carrying out this improved programme were by no means the best, but they were the best available under war conditions. That was inevitable in an organisation which had to be set up in a hurry to meet a pressing emergency. Experts had to be picked from such material as was left after a good deal of the best had either gone to the front or been commandeered for other war work. Mistakes were therefore inevitable and the disgruntled gave them the widest publicity.

*Defects of  
emergency  
organisation*

Many members of Parliament had experienced in

their private capacity as landowners the weight of the Department's hand, and in the House of Lords the majority of members were so hostile that the Bill had to be amended to permit a right of appeal against the Department in cases where it ordered further grass-land to be broken up, or sought to take over land which it held to be mismanaged or under-cultivated. This clipped the wings of the Food Production Department, and made it impossible to hope for the carrying out in full of its proposals for the 1919 harvest.

The strike of the "Junkers" was a serious embarrassment to a Coalition Government, a large and influential section of whose political supporters were drawn from that class. But it was not unexpected. The orders issued for the ploughing of land hitherto kept green and uncultivated for ornamental purposes were received with increasing resentment by some men all-powerful in their domains, who were not accustomed to be ordered about by County Committees as to the use they should make of their park lands and preserves. The grumbling became a growl and at last a snarl with bared teeth. One great landowner who possessed considerable political influence came to me, angrily flourishing a notice which had been served upon him threatening proceedings against him if he did not comply with an order to break up some of his decorative land. He had ignored the order as an impertinence. Hence the threat. When I saw him he was scarlet with fury. He was a man whose patriotism was beyond question. But this proceeding wounded his pride.

*Landowner  
M.P.s hostile*

*The strike of  
the "Junkers"*

*A defiant  
landowner*

He had always been one of the most excitable champions of law and order. Nevertheless he told me that he meant to defy this particular order. I reminded him that it was the law of the land he was setting at defiance. That did not appease him. He thought it an unjust law which interfered with the amenities of a man's home. I pointed out to him that he belonged to an order of Society from which magistrates were drawn who administered laws which were rightly or wrongly often regarded by their humbler neighbours as oppressive, but that such a plea was never accepted from offenders summoned before land-owning justices for a breach of those laws. There could not be one interpretation of obedience to law for the rich and another for the poor. He went away more in anger than in sorrow, for he had a great estate, a long pedigree, a vast sense of personal importance, and the doctrine I had expounded was neither palatable nor intelligible to such a man.

It is difficult to understand the limitations put upon patriotic surrender by men several of whom had endured in that war sacrifices much more irreparable and poignant than those they were called upon to make in respect of their lands. But such is human nature. *Patriotism and its limits* The noble and the petty dwell in the same habitation. They never meet—are not on speaking terms. But they take their turn in running the same soul. When in charge, each of them dominates it to the complete exclusion of the other. The conduct of a man depends on which motive is on the bridge at a given time.

Sir Arthur Lee (who had now become Lord Lee of Fareham) felt so keenly the blow given to his plans by the rebellious Peers that he resigned his post of

Director-General of the Department, rather than share responsibility for abandoning the new programme he had drawn up for 1919. I accepted this resignation with sincere regret, not only because I entirely approved of the Lee programme, but because I appreciated the rare ability and the drive with which Sir Arthur Lee had served his country over both Munitions and Food production. The success he had already achieved was the best answer to the apprehensions he now felt. He had helped to carry us through the danger zone.

*Lord Lee's  
resignation*

A small amount of grass-land was broken up for the harvest of 1919, despite the absence of compulsory powers ; but the corn area fell by 488,000 acres, thus verifying the forecast of the Food Production Department, that half a million acres would fall out of corn production unless an equivalent area of new ground were brought under the plough. But the Department had done its work with surprising efficiency, and had enabled us to carry on through the most critical moments of the War until we reached victory. Without the extra millions of tons of home-grown food which it secured, the nation would have gone hungry in 1918. It would certainly have been compelled to tighten its belt several holes. The only alternative would have been a peace of failure, preceded or followed by revolution.

*Corn-land  
reduction  
in 1919*

Before concluding this account of our Food Production Campaign, I must make special reference to one very important branch of it—important not merely for its material, but perhaps even more for its moral achievements. This was the allotment campaign.

*The allotment  
movement*

If labour in the countryside was scarce, there was great potential capacity in the spare time of the town workers—those in black coats and those in corduroy trousers alike. They could not get out to help on the farms, but round every town there spreads a devastated area of vacant building plots and other waste land which these men and their families could reach in their leisure hours and during their weekly half-days. Quite early we recognised the possibilities of war time allotments, and even in the first year of the War there was a rapid growth of the movement.

*Recruiting  
the urban  
workers*

So promising was this development, that towards the end of 1916 Lord Crawford decided to press forward a further extension by the use of his powers under the Defence of the Realm Acts. On 5th December, 1916, a Regulation was issued empowering the Board of Agriculture to requisition any land for cultivation, and to delegate its powers in this respect to local authorities. On 8th December, the day after I took office as Prime Minister, I authorised the Board to issue the Cultivation of Lands Order, 1916, which empowered urban local authorities to take possession of unoccupied land for the purpose of forming allotments, without previously getting the consent of the owner ; to set up allotments on common land with the consent of the Board ; and to set them up on any occupied land subject to the consent of owner and occupier.

*Cultivation  
of Lands  
Order*

This Order opened the way for a further great allotment advance. Under it, commons, heaths and vacant building plots were commandeered. Hampstead Heath was ploughed up and planted with potatoes. Unsightly wastes were transfigured by

fertility, and city dwellers by hundreds of thousands re-discovered the thrill and wonder of making things grow. A new fraternity made itself felt among these amateur cultivators from classes once widely sundered, who found themselves neighbours in the allotment field. There was a kind of brotherhood of the big potato. On his suburban railway platform the bank manager would produce with pride a monstrous tuber, "grown on my allotment!" and challenge his fellow-passengers to show its rival.

No rent was payable by the authorities to owners of unoccupied or common land, and allotment holders were only required to pay such rent as would recoup the cost of providing and preparing the plots. The authorities were empowered to carry out such preparation, and also to supply seeds, manures and implements at cost price, thus simplifying for would-be pilgrims the unfamiliar road back to the land.

Returns collected from 1,161 towns showed that during 1917 there were provided by urban authorities some 19,812 acres of ground, let in 273,822 plots, for which there were 301,359 applicants. The movement was still further extended in 1918, and it was estimated by the Horticultural Division that in that year there existed in the whole country about 1,400,000 allotments, of which 830,000 had come into existence since the outbreak of the War. Some 400,000 of these had been provided since 1916 by local authorities, equipped with the powers given them by the Lands Cultivation Order. The overwhelming majority of these allotments were being worked by urban dwellers; so that this movement,

*Brotherhood  
of the big  
potato*

*Achievements  
of the  
allotment  
movement*

while it contributed perhaps little to the marketed stocks of food-stuffs, had at least the result of bringing scores of thousands of acres of waste land into production, of harnessing the latent horticultural abilities of townsmen to the task of food-growing, and of ensuring a supply of potatoes and fresh vegetables for nearly one and a half million households.

## 2. RATIONING

The problem of maintaining a sufficient food supply was by no means confined to the task of increasing the home output. At its best—and this best was only reached in the last year of the War—our home production covered only a part of our consumption, and the remainder had to be provided by foreign purchase and importation. Our shipping was shrinking, and the demands of our Allies were increasing, and it became essential for us to exercise a strict supervision over our stocks, and take drastic steps to ration their distribution, so as to ensure that if few enjoyed abundance, none should go hungry.

The policy of food control and rationing was highly uncongenial to our national temper, and had to be developed carefully and cautiously. Probably Mr. Runciman voiced the natural instinctive attitude of most people to the idea when, speaking in a debate on food prices in the House of Commons on 17th October, 1916, he declared :—

“ . . . The one thing that we ought to avoid in this country is, from any cause whatever, to put ourselves into the position of a blockaded people.

Bread tickets, meat coupons, all these artificial arrangements are harmful, and they are harmful to those who have the least with which to buy. . . . We want to avoid any rationing of our people in food."

This was all very well, but if there was only a limited supply, something had to be done to make it go round. Mr. Runciman himself was soon forced by the intensified submarine attacks to take a different view. On 15th and 16th November, 1916, there was another debate in the House on Food Prices and Supplies. Two days previously the War Committee had agreed in principle with the proposal which I had repeatedly urged on them, that a Food Controller should be appointed with drastic powers to deal with the production, supply and price of food-stuffs.\* Mr. Runciman accordingly outlined in the course of the Debate the intention of the Government to appoint a Food Controller, and the additional powers it proposed to acquire to enforce economies, and to control manufacture, distribution and sale of food. "If it becomes necessary for us to embark on food tickets," he said, *A change of mind* "obviously we must have the power given to us to do it without long and protracted discussion. Directly the need becomes apparent, power ought to be given to us to act." He instanced the working of the Ministry of Munitions as an example of what could be done in the way of efficient Government control of industry by means of securing the co-operation of able business men, and as some reassurance to those who might share his fear and dislike of systems of control.

\* See Vol. II, Chapter xxxiii, pp. 966-969.



On 17th November, 1916, a series of Regulations for the control of food supplies was published. The Board of Trade was authorised to make orders for imposing the most drastic restrictions in respect of food consumption.

Penalties were laid down for resistance to orders of the Board of Trade made under these regulations.

Next day the Board of Trade made two orders, fixing maximum prices for milk and laying down the percentages of flour that must be milled from different qualities of wheat. The Board also made an order prohibiting the use of wheat for brewing, since on account of a shortage of barley, brewers were buying wheat in its place. But any systematic exercise of the further powers acquired by the Government through these regulations was possible only when the Food Controller had been appointed. As I have already shown, that appointment was made when the new Government was formed in December, 1916.

As soon as Lord Devonport, the new Food Controller, took office, he appointed a Committee to study the question of rationing, under the chairmanship of Mr. (now Sir Alfred) Butt, to whose intelligent handling of this troublesome duty we owe a good deal. In three weeks' time this Committee prepared a detailed plan for rationing the food of the nation. It was practically the scheme that was put into operation later on by Lord Rhondda. It was drawn up on the assumption that sooner or later rationing might have to be made compulsory.

For the time being, the Cabinet considered it necessary to hold the scheme in reserve. We recognised

the strength of the popular prejudice against compulsory rationing, and decided to approach it—as had previously been done with compulsory service—along the line of first exhausting the possibilities of voluntary control. As a matter of fact, the representatives of Labour in the Government warned us emphatically that the workers would not at that time submit to a compulsory rationing system, and we properly gave due weight to this expert advice.

*Labour  
objects to  
rationing*

But detailed rationing of the ultimate consumer was by no means the only way in which control could be exercised. On 14th December, 1916, Lord Devonport stated in the House of Lords that he would take steps, not only to maintain our food supplies, but to ensure that they should be fairly distributed, and with this end in view, would begin by finding out from statistical returns what stocks there were available, with a view to their fair distribution. This he proceeded to do without delay. Meantime, in mid-December, an order was issued through the Board of Trade, which limited meals in clubs, hotels, and other public eating places, to three courses between 6 p.m. and 9.30 p.m. and to two courses at other times, and fixed maximum prices for meals served to soldiers in all licensed premises in London.

*Lord  
Devonport  
takes action*

On 11th January, 1917, the Food Controller issued six Orders—the first batch of a long series of such Orders issued from time to time in the course of the next two years. To illustrate the nature of the restrictions that were imposed, the purport of some of these Orders may be summarised as follows :—

*First Orders  
of the  
Ministry*

*Wheat* : Its use for any other purpose than for seed or flour-milling was prohibited. Millers were required to add to the percentage of flour milled from wheat a further five to ten per cent. obtained either from the offals or from the addition of barley, maize, rice or oat flour. The feeding of game with any grain or grain products required for food or feeding-stuffs was prohibited.

*Sweets, Chocolate and Pastry* : Expensive sweets were forbidden. No manufacturer was to make more than 50 per cent. of the sweetmeats he had made in 1915. Sugar and chocolate coverings of pastries and cakes were forbidden. The use of winter milk in the manufacture of chocolate was prohibited.

At the beginning of February, Lord Devonport issued an appeal for the adoption of voluntary rationing. He stated that compulsory rationing would be avoided as far and for as long as possible, and for the time being he urged the public to limit their purchases of staple foods as follows : Bread, 4 lb. (or, for bread making, its equivalent of 3 lb. of flour) per head per week ; meat,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  lb. ; sugar,  $\frac{3}{4}$  lb. He pointed out that only by such frugality could sufficient be available for all, and ample supplies for our soldiers and sailors.

The Germans unwittingly came to our aid in this appeal by publishing in America a statement that Great Britain had only 30 days' supply of food-stuffs. We promptly sent a contradiction to our Ambassador in the States, but decided not to publish denials at home, since it was important that our people should economise, and the Germans were helping on the good work.

On 3rd February, 1917, I addressed a public meeting at Carnarvon upon the nation's task in the War. In the course of my speech I took advantage of the occasion to add my appeal to that of Lord Devonport for economy in food. I said :—

*My speech at  
Carnarvon*

“ What is the next appeal ? It is to the housewife. I want her to read what the Food Controller has got in the papers to-day as to what each of us is to have next week to eat—  
*Appeal to housewives* (laughter)—the national menu. It does not matter how insistent either the husband or the children may be ; show them this regulation and say, No more. You have had 2½ lb. and not another ounce more ! (laughter). He has made a voluntary appeal, and for a very good reason. New organisation means energy and labour, and we need them all. If you had a compulsory system you would need a new organisation, but we want the nation itself to do things. It would be better for the nation. The Government has so much to do that really we want the nation to join the Government. Every housekeeper we want to become a member of the Government, to administer that part of the King's Dominions which is in her immediate sphere. Let them govern it for the King, and carry out the King's regulations. There are eight millions of householders. Let them have, if you will, eight million governments, so that each helps to win the War. That is the appeal I make for the Food Controller. It all bears on the submarine menace. Saving of food means the saving of tonnage, and saving tonnage is the very life of the nation at the present moment.”

The country took up with a good deal of fine enthusiasm the appeal to them for a voluntary restriction of their use of food. Within a few days Lord Devonport had the gratification of receiving a call from Sir Derek Keppel, who came to tell him on the King's behalf that it was being strictly observed by every member of the Royal Household.

*The King  
adopts  
food rations*

But the growing submarine menace made inroads upon our importing capacity which rapidly threatened to outrun the limit of the economies which could be achieved on a voluntary basis, and in March and April, 1917, a number of compulsory restrictions were imposed on the distribution and sale of food-stuffs. Bread could not be sold till it was 12 hours old. Compulsory potato rations were fixed for hotels, clubs and restaurants, and a meatless day was compulsory for them. Manufacture for sale of light pastries, muffins, crumpets and tea-cakes was prohibited. The principal flour mills were taken over by the Food Controller, and measures of control imposed in respect of rice, peas, beans and pulse. An Order was issued prohibiting food hoarding, and drastic action threatened against any individuals who continued to consume more than their proper ration.

Germany was at this time furnishing an illustration of the immense importance of the Cabinet's policy of firmly controlling the supply of food. In the autumn of 1916 the German Government had overestimated the yield of its harvest, and did not find out its mistake till February, 1917, when it also discovered that the civilian population had, in fact, been

*The warning  
of German  
experience*

consuming more food than was allotted to them. In a panic the Government drastically cut down the supplies for the towns, with the result that in a few weeks the morale of their urban populations was badly shaken, and their war fervour was being replaced by cries for peace at any price. Only by drawing on the reserves that had been set aside for feeding the Army did the German Government avert a collapse in the early summer of 1917. How great were the risks they took in cutting down the Army supplies they realised in 1918. For our part, while we maintained our civilian food supply at a sufficient if frugal limit, we resolved even at the worst moment of our food crisis not to reduce the ration of our fighting men. It was never cut down by a single ounce, nor was its quality allowed to deteriorate, to the end of the War, by a single protein, calory or vitamin. But that was a policy we could never have carried through had it not been for our campaign of increased production and stern rationing at home.

By May, 1917, a far-reaching system of control over supplies had been instituted. The rates of distribution and consumption of food had been fixed, though in the main the observance of the limits was left on a voluntary basis. At the end of the month, Lord Devonport found himself unable to continue his work as Food Controller, owing to a serious breakdown in health. Under imperative orders from his doctor he tendered his resignation. I very regretfully accepted it. He was replaced at the Food Ministry by Lord Rhondda.

*Resignation  
of Lord  
Devonport.  
Lord Rhondda  
appointed*

Among the wartime measures with which Lord Devonport was associated during his term as Food Controller was the further restriction of liquor.

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The matter was raised by him in a memorandum to the War Cabinet on 12th January, 1917, in which he urged that a 50 per cent. cut in brewing would preserve home-grown barley for food purposes and set free tonnage used for imported brewing materials. With his memorandum was considered one from the Central Control (Liquor Traffic) Board, which reported the remarkable success which had attended the measures so far taken to restrict and control the sale of alcohol, and urged still further measures, including State Purchase.

*Liquor  
control*

The War Cabinet considered these suggestions, but decided that the question of State Purchase should be deferred until other more urgent measures had been settled. The Cabinet on 23rd January, decided that for the time being brewing should be restricted to 60 per cent. of the 1915 output, and that the release of wines and spirits from bond should be cut down proportionately. After enough grain had been malted to supply the brewers for their restricted output, the Food Controller was empowered to stop further malting. A public announcement of this decision was made on 24th January by the Food Controller.

*War Cabinet  
defers State  
Purchase*

As regards the further developments of this question of liquor restriction, it may be added that on 16th February we decided to make a further reduction of 30 per cent. in the figure of beer permitted under the Output of Beer Restriction Act. The result of this would be that whereas before the War there were about 35,000,000 standard barrels brewed annually, now there would be about 10,000,000 barrels. On

*Subsequent  
brewing  
restrictions  
outlined*

21st February the Home Secretary was asked to set up a Committee on which the brewers should be represented, to enquire into the position created by these restrictions, and report to the Cabinet.

The Committee's report, which came before the Cabinet on 22nd March, was in favour of State

Purchase, although there were difficulties about estimating the price, owing to the complication introduced by the restrictions ; and licensed victuallers were

*State Purchase urged*

not in favour of purchase, except in Ireland. After extended private discussions with leaders of the Trade, we decided on 31st May in favour of assuming Government control over the liquor trade, with a view to probable State Purchase after the War. Committees were set up to examine the situation in England and Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, and report on the terms on which control should be acquired.

But alcohol is a refractory citizen, and as he has a multitude of friends everywhere he soon made trouble. With the arrival of summer weather, wide-spread discontent began to show itself in munition centres and among landworkers at the scarcity of beer and its high price.

*Light beer for harvesters and munition workers*

It was decided to meet this by brewing light beer, and in place of imposing immediate Government control we arranged on 21st June, 1917, to permit the brewing of  $33\frac{1}{3}$  per cent. more beer for the next three months, on condition that its alcoholic strength was reduced, and its price correspondingly modified.

This increase in the amount to be brewed was later made permanent, but subject to restrictions on its specific gravity, and to conditions as to a proportion



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being placed at the Food Controller's disposal for distribution to munition areas, and to agricultural districts in harvest time. *Summary of progress in brewing restriction* Ultimately, in March, 1918, it was decided that all the beer brewed in Great Britain should be of a specific gravity not exceeding 1030°.

The effect of our successive modifications of the brewing programme can be summarised as follows. The output of beer, calculated in terms of standard barrels, was :—

In 1913-14,	36,000,000	standard barrels ;
in 1915-16,	30,000,000	„ „ ;
in 1916-17,	26,000,000	„ „ ;
in 1917 to the end of the War	12,500,000	standard barrels per annum.

Although the innocuous but insipid character of this light beer was the source of a good deal of grumbling at the time, it unquestionably helped to wean millions of the workers of Britain from their pre-War proclivity to unduly heavy drinks. *Improvement in national sobriety* The old habit of stupefaction by strong ales, which led to many being not perhaps drunk, but fuddled, was permanently broken. So was the habit of men getting drunk on Saturday nights which was so prevalent amongst a section of the wage earners before the War. This is one legacy of good from the wartime work of Food Control.

The system of food control which had been inaugurated by Lord Devonport was continued and extended by Lord Rhondda. *Work of Lord Rhondda* One of the first decisions of the new Controller was to set up a Costing Department to examine the question of food costs with a view to

fixing maximum prices, and on 29th June, 1917, an Order in Council was published under D.O.R.A., giving the Food Controller full powers of requisitioning food and fixing prices. It was necessary to take some strong action of this kind, because by June, 1917, the Board of Trade figures showed that the retail food prices had now risen 102 per cent. above their level in July, 1914, whereas the general cost of living index, including food, had risen only 70 to 75 per cent.

The War Cabinet considered this matter further on 19th July, 1917. The steadily mounting prices for food were producing a good deal of industrial unrest which was interfering with the output of war material. Workers were striking to obtain higher wages with which to meet the higher costs of living. We felt that for the vigorous prosecution of the War a contented working class was indispensable, and we took note of the fact that in France bread was being supplied to the people at rates corresponding to an eightpenny quartern loaf. As wheat and flour were now under full control, we decided to fix

*A ninepenny  
loaf*

the price of bread at ninepence per quartern loaf. This would involve the Treasury in a loss of £33 million. The French were spending £37 million in subsidising their loaf. We also authorised the Food Controller to fix prices for meat, varying with the customs of the different localities.

The decisions reached were announced by Lord Rhondda in the House of Lords on 26th July. He explained that his purpose was to fix the prices of these articles of prime necessity over the supply of which he could obtain effective control at every stage from the producer down to the retailer. He would

use every effort to check speculation and eliminate needless middle-men. The work of the Food Ministry would be as far as possible decentralised, and important functions committed to the Local Authorities. Each would be asked to appoint a Food Control Committee, the duties of which would be to enforce the Food Controller's orders ; to register the retailers of the various food-stuffs ; to recommend variations in the scale of retail food prices ; to maintain and extend the economy campaign ; and to administer the new scheme of sugar distribution, which would be made by means of sugar cards. He also described the arrangements whereby bread would be subsidised and its price fixed.

In the first week in August, Lord Rhondda circularised the Local Authorities, laying before them his scheme of food control. The principles of the policy were threefold : to conserve supplies ; to ensure that rich and poor shared alike ; and to keep down prices. He recommended central kitchens as a means of economising food and fuel. He set out the system of sugar cards that was to be inaugurated, and he notified the authorities of his intention to fix a general scale of prices for all important food-stuffs. Towards the end of August the wholesale and retail prices of meat were fixed by order. On 10th August, the appointment of six Food Commissioners was announced ; four for England and Wales ; two for Scotland. The Order setting up the Food Control Committees came out in the course of the month.

Thus was set up the machinery which functioned during the remainder of the War to secure the fair distribution and economical use of our limited

supplies of food. Bearing in mind that it was a new and inexperienced *ad hoc* machinery, set up to carry through an unprecedented task ; that those who had to work it in every town and country district were men already overburdened with duties, and short-handed—the pick of our manhood having been already withdrawn to serve their country overseas, and the best brains at home being already requisitioned for munitions or other forms of Government service ; and remembering, too, that they were called on to restrict supplies of food, the most vitally indispensable of all commodities, which people will often sacrifice every scruple to obtain for themselves or those who are dependent on their care ; considering these facts, it would be hard to praise too highly the fine spirit with which their task was faced, and the good average of efficiency with which it was carried out. We had set up the sternest but the fairest and most effective system of food production and control in any of the belligerent countries. The fact that it was administered with relentless impartiality made it austere acceptable to all grades of society.

It is hardly necessary to linger long over the further progress of food restriction. In September, orders came into force, fixing the maximum wholesale and retail prices for meat, butter, flour and potatoes, and also for milk ; and also wholesale prices for cheese. In November, a new scale of voluntary rations was announced, applying to meat, bread and all other cereals, butter, margarine, lard, fats and oils. Lord Rhondda was able to report that the steep upward motion of food prices had been

*Creditable  
achievements of  
food control  
machinery*

*Further  
progress of  
restriction*

checked, and that in some cases they had even been reduced. Meat prices had fallen 15 to 20 per cent. in the last few months.

In December, 1917, the growth of food queues outside the shops in London and some provincial centres led to a further Order by the Food Controller to ensure fair distribution and thus to prevent queues. Under the Order, local Food Committees could prohibit the sale of any specified food article except by a licensed or registered retailer ; require him only to sell it to customers registered with him for the purpose, and only in quantities within limits laid down by the Committees. And they further had power to prevent any one retailer from taking more registered customers than he could conveniently serve without driving them into queues ; to transfer supplies from one retailer to another ; and to prescribe manner and time of sale.

With 1st January, 1918, a compulsory meatless day was enforced, and on one day a week no meat, cooked or uncooked, might be sold. Organised Labour, which had hitherto been opposed to compulsory rationing, declared itself at the end of December, 1917, in favour of it as an alternative to food queues, and in January, Mr. Clynes, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Food Ministry, announced that extensive rationing would before long be put into force. A scheme for this had been fully worked out months before by Sir Alfred Butt and a special Rationing Committee under Lord Devonport, before the latter resigned from the Food Ministry. On 25th February, 1918, a system of rationing meat, butter and margarine was put into force in London

*Measures to  
stop food queues*

*Individual  
rationing  
decided upon*

and the Home Counties, and early in April the rationing of meat was extended to the whole country. In July a new system of ration books was introduced. By this time the foods subject to compulsory rationing were sugar, butter, margarine, meat of all kinds, and lard. Tea was also subject to a system of restriction, and before long, jam and marmalade were added to the list of rationed articles.

So far as the vast bulk of the population was concerned, this rationing system, troublesome though in some respects it was to them, ensured a regular and sufficient food supply; and it made it possible for those in charge to calculate with some precision how best they could make the stocks of available food-stuffs go round equitably. When meat was slightly more plentiful, the ration could be raised. When it grew scarcer, the amount purchasable with each meat coupon was cut down. The steady improvement in our national health figures during and after the War, as compared with pre-War returns, shows that compulsory temperance in eating was in general more beneficial than harmful in its effects. Although there was a degree of scarcity, we were never faced with famine or actual privation. Credit is due to our people for the loyal manner in which they submitted themselves to these strange and unwelcome restrictions. Without general goodwill it would have been impossible to make the regulations effective. That goodwill did not fail. It was not impeded but helped by a few prosecutions for breach of the regulations, for the cases selected demonstrated that the Food Controller was no respecter of persons and that the law was enforced impartially for rich and poor alike.

*Success of  
the system*

### 3. FEEDING OUR ALLIES

The task of Food Control was complicated by the fact that, as the principal shipping Power on the Allied side, we had to take thought, not only for ourselves, but also for our Allies. *Responsibility for feeding our Allies* Food cargoes which we urgently needed for our own population we had from time to time to divert to meet the needs of France and Italy, and to save their Governments from having to face dangerous discontent. While this food-importing island not only maintained but increased its home-grown food supplies during the War, France, a food-producing country, much more thinly populated, had to call more and more insistently for outside help. Some of its most fertile provinces were in enemy hands, and as the range and intensity of bombardment lengthened the area of cultivation diminished. Moreover, as nearly half the French Army was drawn from the rural areas, the drain on the man-power of France was telling seriously on the productiveness of the soil.

Soon after America entered the War, Mr. Hoover, who had been in charge of the work of Belgian Relief and had been appointed Food *Mr. Hoover's Memorandum:* Controller in the U.S.A., had an inter-*International Board proposed* view with Lord Robert Cecil and handed him a memorandum, proposing that since all the Allies were seeking to buy food in the States, it would be desirable for them to set up an International Board to co-ordinate their demands, ascertain the available supplies, and allocate them among the Allied countries. He pointed out that "the general outlook from now on is that the available supplies and shipping will be a diminishing, rather

than an increasing quantity ; that, in consequence, control will need to be exercised in the allocation of these supplies among the Allies." He further pointed out that "the important producing centres having surpluses for export are, with the exception of the Argentine, now under Allied control, and are, therefore, now possible of exclusive distribution and use by the Allies." Coming to the position in America he says : "From a strictly American point of view, the centralisation of buying of any particular staple in one set of hands will promote the regulation of prices, and a knowledge of the amount of food-stuffs required by the Allies will promote any action which may be taken by the American Government with a view to control of prices, stimulation of production, reduction of consumption of special staples, or the substitution of other American products for them so as to set free such staples for export. It is my impression that the large rise in prices during the last few months have been due in considerable measure to the rivalry of different Allied organisations in the American markets."

The matter was considered at a meeting of the War Cabinet on 18th April, 1917, which Mr. Hoover was invited to attend. He is the only President of the U.S.A. who has taken part in the proceedings of a British Cabinet. We decided :—

*Hoover in  
the Cabinet*

(a) To approve the principle of an International Food Board, and we asked Lord Milner first to confer with the Secretary of State for the Colonies on the subject of the representation of the Dominions.

(b) That Lord Robert Cecil should interview



the American Ambassador with the object of securing the adhesion of the United States to the project, and, through the United States, that of France and Italy.

Agreement of the other Allies to this proposal was not speedily obtained, but eventually, on 27th August, 1917, an Inter-Allied Meat and Fats Executive was set up in London to deal with bacon and hams, lard, butter, cheese and meat—including preserved meat. The commission carried on its work in close co-operation with Mr. Hoover, and evolved a scheme by which the requirements of the Allies were purchased on the same basis as those of the United States Army and Navy.

*Inter-Allied  
Commission  
set up*

This Commission did not touch the purchase of wheat, which was handled in the United States by the Wheat Export Co., Inc., as agents for the Royal Commission on Wheat Supplies. This Commission worked in with the Wheat Executive, an International body that we had arranged to set up in London to serve the interests of Britain, France and Italy. All wheat supplies for the Allies were procured, so far as American purchases were concerned, through this channel.

*The  
arrangements  
for wheat  
purchase*

On 25th October, 1917, the matter of our Allies' demands for more wheat imports came up before the War Cabinet. Lord Milner reported that M. Clémentel, the French Minister of Commerce, who was in London, was demanding bigger imports of corn into France, and pressing for the adoption of an arrangement which would lay down agreed minimum requirements for the United Kingdom,

France and Italy respectively. I had similarly to report that the Italian Ambassador had called on me that morning and handed me an urgent request from Italy in respect of food. He had given me a very bad account, from his personal experience during a recent visit to Italy, of the food situation there.

Members of the War Cabinet pointed out that even if the French harvest was below the normal, there must still be plenty of food in that country. There was no system of distribution in France comparable in its security or imperturbability to that which had been set up and was being applied in this country. The French demands amounted to a request that we should supply their deficiencies because the French Government was too weak to compel its peasantry to stop hoarding. Before long there would no doubt be real need in France, which we should have to help, because the French Government had not established any satisfactory system of control or limitation of consumption which would result in effective economies, even to the same extent as the economies which we were effecting voluntarily in this country. We decided that a careful examination of the facts must be first made before the terms of any pooling of food resources could be determined.

Five days later, on 30th October, 1917, Mr. Balfour reported to the War Cabinet that preliminary investigation showed the food situation in Italy to be really serious. The collapse of Caporetto had taken place while our previous discussion had been in progress, and though we were now arranging for strong military aid to Italy, it would be of little use if

*French failure  
to prevent  
hoarding*

*Grave food  
shortage in  
Italy*

through a food shortage her population refused to go on with the War. As to France, M. Clémentel had announced his intention of going back to France to hand in his resignation if nothing satisfactory were settled by the end of the week.

The difficulty was of course primarily one of tonnage. There were so many urgent demands upon our shipping, including demands by our Allies for munitions and coal, that it was a question of how we could maintain our other vitally important commitments in the teeth of the growing shipping shortage, and at the same time increase food imports for the benefit of our Allies. The whole matter hinged on the general military policy, and we considered that we could come to no decision till this, and the general shipping situation in the light of it, had been reviewed.

*Problems  
dependent  
on shipping*

Eventually we decided that :—

(a) For the next two months certain wheat ships should be diverted from the United Kingdom to France and Italy, these Governments being informed by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of our action in the matter.

(b) The President of the Board of Trade and the Shipping Controller should prepare a statement as to the shipping situation generally and its adequacy to meet the demands of the Allies.

In order to reassure M. Clémentel, an agreement was entered into whereby we expressed our readiness to view the responsibility for the food supplies of France and Italy as being a common charge on all the Allies, including the United States. At the War Cabinet meeting of 6th November, Lord Robert Cecil

*Responsibility  
assumed for  
feeding France  
and Italy*

stressed the importance of this step, saying that Italian fear of food and coal shortage had been used by German propaganda as one means of helping to create the recent debacle of Caporetto. It was pointed out that under this agreement we had decided that the carriage of the food for the Allies, as well as the purchase, should be for joint account. Sir Joseph Maclay said that if we must provide a further 2,000,000 tons of shipping space in 1918 to carry cereals to France and Italy, we must cut our own requirements down by this additional amount. Already he was estimating a cut of 6,000,000 tons in our 1918 imports, and this fresh demand would involve a total cut of over 8,000,000 tons of imports.

We appointed a Committee to go into the question of the imports to be sacrificed in this connection.

*French fail to play their part* The task was not made any more welcome by the information laid before the War Cabinet on 14th November, that the

French Government had refrained from requisitioning all their available tonnage, and were allowing part of it to be used still for private profit. It also came to our knowledge on the same day that the French had raised an additional 800,000 tons of coal from their collieries in the course of the year, but had omitted to inform us of the fact.

Meantime we were being urged to divert to Italy as many as possible of the cargoes of oats now on their way to us from America, to save

*Cavalry obsession visits Italy* the Italian cavalry from being immobilised. The cavalry obsession had crossed the Alps. No General could contemplate the possibility of a war which did not furnish at least one picture of a cavalry charge. The stocks of oats for our own army transports in

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France were at the time very low, but I recognised that every effort must be made at this critical moment to keep Italy contented, and we accordingly arranged to send to Italy the oats we had purchased from the United States for our own army, and replenish our own supplies in France from such stocks as were available in Great Britain and in Ireland.

There can be little question that our Continental Allies failed to carry out anything in the way of food control at all comparable with the firmly organised measures we adopted in this country. At the War Cabinet for 14th February, 1918, *French amazed at our rationing system* the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs stated that the French Ambassador had expressed serious misgivings in regard to the British food supply, and doubted whether the British people would be content with the proposed scale of rations. The French had tried the plan of limiting prices, and it had failed completely, with the result that another system had had to be adopted.

On 24th April, 1918, we had to consider an urgent appeal from Italy for more wheat. The situation was that the arrivals of wheat in each of the Allied countries were short of the programme in approximately the same proportion, but that the difference between the French and ourselves on the one hand, and Italy on the other, was that we had begun the year with several weeks' supply in reserve, and that the French had now been obliged to admit that they also had had several, though not quite as many, weeks' stock in reserve. The Italians, on the other hand, had no reserve and had actually impinged on the new harvest before the new cereal year had commenced. They had just enough, if no exceptional

losses of wheat in transit, such as had sometimes taken place, occurred.

We decided to send them a special allotment of an extra 25,000 tons of wheat.

In the case of France there is, of course, no doubt that the deadly drain of the War upon its man-power left it very short-handed for the tilling of its fields. In August, 1918, the French went to the length of sending over to Ireland to recruit Irish labourers for work on the land. Yet bearing in mind that nearly half the population of France, and two-thirds that of Italy, obtained their livelihood on the land, as compared with less than a tenth of the population in this country, and that their populations were very much smaller in relation to their agricultural acreage, it is remarkable that we had for the last year of the War to undertake the responsibility of feeding them both. The French and the Italians had not taken the measures adopted here to increase their mechanical powers and their stocks of fertilisers.

*French food  
failure  
remarkable*

Beyond any question, our food organisation both for increasing the yield of our own soil, and for limiting and economically distributing to our own people the available food-stuffs, was superior to that set up by any of the combatant countries.

*Our food  
organisation  
superior to  
that of other  
belligerents*

By the combined measures we took to increase the home production of food whilst restricting consumption beyond the limit of strict necessity, we reached the end of the War without enduring the privations that broke the spirit of other equally brave nations engaged in the struggle. We were able not only to feed ourselves but to help in conveying food for our Allies. The last and most trying year

of the War we raised from our own soil more cereals than in the years before the War. If the failure to

organise and administer to the best advantage the food resources of Russia and the Central Empires led to their defeat,

it will be conceded that the handling of the food problem in this country contributed in no small measure to the attainment of ultimate victory by the Allies. It would be hard to overstate the service rendered by our wartime Ministry of Food, and those who gave—many of them without pay—their services to it, in organising from this side the victory of the Allies.

## CHAPTER XLV

### A SYSTEM OF NATIONAL SERVICE

IN war the ultimate problem is man-power. It was in the last resort the number, calibre, equipment and training of the men that made or worked the machinery of war or sustained the life of the nation during the War, that would decide whether we could endure to the end where victory awaits. It is not necessarily the strongest nation that wins, but the one that has made the best use of its strength.

*Man-power  
the first  
essential in war*

By the end of the third campaign, man-power in all the countries engaged in the struggle was reaching the point of exhaustion. Germany had made a better use of machinery, engineering skill and intelligent training to save her men than any other nation in the fight. In spite, therefore, of the enormous front on which her armies fought, and the hundreds of battles in which they had been engaged, West, East and South-East, her casualties were lower in proportion to the numbers of her fighting men than those of any other army on either side. The sanguinary attack on Verdun was planned on the principle that the machine was to take the leading part in crushing the defence. The result was that although it was a German offensive against Frenchmen protected by tremendous forts, the defenders lost more men than

*Growing  
shortage in  
all countries*



the assailants. Nevertheless, the German losses were already heavy, and Germany was experiencing a difficulty in filling up gaps in her armies, whilst at the same time meeting the demands for increased equipment on land and sea and for making up the diminishing supplies of food at home. Austria had suffered heavily, not merely from casualties necessarily incurred in fighting so many great battles against Russians, Italians, Serbians, and Roumanians, but even more from the readiness with which her Slavonic troops surrendered on the Russian Front, sometimes by thousands, often by tens of thousands, and in at least one battle by hundreds of thousands. In France and Britain the profligate expenditure of young life in ill-conceived offensives—and, in Russia, in muddle and corruption—had left the belligerents short of the necessary reserves to keep up the prodigious wastage. At this date the warring nations had lost by death or crippling wounds 10,000,000 men in the flower of their strength. The number of prisoners of war ran into millions. Our great volunteer army was not ready for the fighting before 1916. Our casualties were not therefore comparable to those suffered by France or Germany; but by the end of that year our losses were already over 1,000,000. The spring offensive had added 200,000 to the melancholy pyre. As French man-power was on the wane, the burden of the struggle was falling more and more upon us. At sea the fight was almost entirely ours, and its strain was increasing. On land the struggle in the West was left gradually to our Army. In the Far East it was entirely ours. This meant more and more men for the fighting lines. But it also meant that the demands behind the lines

*Ten million  
casualties*

for supplies to the Army and Navy were rapidly increasing everywhere. The fulfilment of these requirements involved the employment of more men. The Army and Navy wanted more men—but so did the munition works, to turn out guns, tanks, ammunition, and anti-submarine appliances. The shipyards had to treble their output in merchant ships and in naval craft and in repair of both, otherwise our sea transport would break down under the exceptional strain of incessant active service, we should lose the command of the sea and the Allies might be starved into surrender. The Allies were clamouring for more coal: the coal mines demanded more men to increase output. The fields needed more men to increase essential food commodities, so as to satisfy the requirements which hitherto had been supplied from across the seas. All this complication of urgent demands resolved itself into a problem of making the best use of a reserve of man-power which was not equal to the full need, even with the most efficient and scientific distribution. And there were limits to the power of any Government to place the manhood of the nation to the best advantage.

The deep-rooted tradition of personal liberty which has long held sway in Britain made it a matter of the greatest difficulty for the Government to secure general consent for the exercise of its common-law right to call on all its citizens to carry out such tasks as it might lay on them for the national security. You cannot move human beings about with the ease and passive acquiescence of pawns on a chess board. There is a limit where the most complex and implacable human emotions offer resistance to the demands made on the

*Manifold  
demands  
for men*

*Difficulty of  
using com-  
pulsion in  
Britain*

human will for departure' from wont and habit. Patriotism has eccentric and incalculable limitations in different countries. It is often the result of some ancient conflict which has left traditional resistance in the very fibre of a nation's mind, just as in deep ploughing you come against boulders deposited in the soil during the glacial period. In France, where for generations they have been accustomed to being conscripted for military service, no difficulties were encountered in calling up every able-bodied man for the Army. On the other hand, Governments there shrank from raising money for war purposes by new imposts with which the French citizen was not familiar, and although the young men of France and Germany entered readily at the call into the stern bondage of army discipline in war, and were prepared to face death at an order given to them, no Government would dare enforce the same discipline at the works where war material was produced. The traditions of the workshop were not those of the army.

I have previously described how slowly and unwillingly a system of compulsion for military service was adopted in this country. But military service, while the most spectacular and heroic method of serving the country, was by no means the exclusively important one. Indeed, throughout the War there were at all times more of the male population of Great Britain (as of all other belligerents) employed at home on Government work than there were overseas in the expeditionary forces. Apart from munitions of war on land and sea, which included a large building programme and large repairing establishments for the Navy, there were the ordinary demands of a population of 46,000,000. These had to be supplied

by what was left of our workers after 8,000,000 had been taken away either for the Army and Navy or for their munitionment and supply. The task of supreme difficulty for the Government was to secure that every man should be used where he would be of greatest value. It was a task never fully carried out ; though in the last two years of the War considerable progress was made towards its achievement. As the War developed, as the military and naval demands became greater and man-power decreased through casualties, the problem in all belligerent countries became more and more urgent.

The ideal would have been for the whole population to be conscripted at the very outbreak of the War, and every man posted forthwith in accordance with a wisely thought-out plan to the job where he would be of most service to our war effort. But such a war as that of 1914-18 had never been experienced or foreseen, much less planned for even by the militarist nations of the Continent. As for us, we had relied on our Navy to keep off the invader. Our Army was just a police force for the Empire. Protected by the moat, our whole national temper had been tuned to the organisation and tasks of peace. So our early war efforts were spasmodic and largely incoherent. Men were allowed to go abroad in our fighting forces who were vitally wanted at home, while others who could far better have been spared for the Army, proceeded to regard themselves as indispensable at home. Indispensability was largely a question of individual choice and disposition and not of national interest. The peace-time organisations of industry, both capital and labour, were maintained for lack of any well-planned system to replace them.

*Our lack of  
organisation  
for war*

As the War went on, Government control and direction were slowly extended. Capital suffered a certain measure of conscription through the Excess Profits Duties and the control of profits in establishments making munitions. Industry experienced a direct overruling, through the conversion of many workshops into controlled establishments and the setting up of National Factories. Railways and shipping, the restriction and licensing of imports, and transport gradually passed more and more under Government control. Labour was in some measure placed under compulsion by the setting up of "reserved occupations," the badging of men engaged on necessary Government work, restrictions on transfer from one establishment to another, and the powers held by the Government under the Military Service Acts of taking men for the Army if they were not doing work of sufficient national importance at home. But some of the most important steps were taken only with great difficulty against the tenacious opposition or the immutable habitude of the vested interests of capital and labour. There was no lack of patriotism. But there were endless prejudices, traditions, jealousies and susceptibilities that impeded its quick and full action.

As regards the control of our man-power, our difficulty throughout the War with the representatives of labour centred round the suspicion of profiteering by the proprietors of works engaged on Government contracts, so that the workers in them had not the same feeling of direct and whole-hearted national service that they developed in the Army or Navy. To conscript men for industry seemed to the workers

*Government  
control slowly  
extended*

*Compulsion  
inacceptable  
to industry*

equivalent to forcing them by law to work for the benefit of private capitalists—a proceeding which they would quite rightly have resisted to the uttermost. Yet much of this work was at least as vital to our national safety as was the maintenance at full strength of our fighting forces. For them we could take men almost at will, fixing our own standards of age and physical fitness. For the home front we had to rely still on the voluntary system, reinforced in some measure by the provisions to which I have already alluded.

It was to deal with this very difficult but essential problem that on setting up my Ministry at the end of 1916 I decided to form a new Department of National Service. The War Committee under the previous Government had already, as one of its last acts, approved in principle on 30th November, 1916, the introduction of a system of National Service, leaving the details to be worked out by a Committee, presided over by Mr. Montagu, then Minister of Munitions. The suggestion was that it should apply to all men up to 60 years of age, and possibly also to women. A first draft for a Bill to enact this system was prepared by the Committee, and came before the new War Cabinet on 14th December, 1916. I was away at the time, suffering from an attack of influenza. In my absence the War Cabinet shrank from reaching any final decision on this complex and far-reaching subject, but gave a preliminary survey to the question and provisionally decided that :—

- (a) A Director of National Service, should be appointed who should be in charge both of the Military and Civil side of Compulsory National Service.

(b) The Civil and the Military sides of the Directorate of National Service should be entirely separate—that is to say, the Director of National Service would have under him a Military Director and a Civil Director, with a clear line of demarcation between them. The object of this proviso is to allay any suspicion that the adoption of Compulsory National Service for Civil purposes would bring the persons affected under military control.

(c) The functions of the Ministry of Labour and the Director of National Service will have to be clearly defined at an early date. Mr. Henderson undertook to discuss this question with the new Labour Minister and his colleagues.

(d) No announcement should be made in regard to the Director of National Service until the holder of the post has been nominated and the scope of his duties and responsibilities have been defined.

The War Cabinet were of opinion that Mr. E. S. Montagu would be the best man to undertake the duties of Director. We duly offered him this post, but he did not at the time feel prepared to undertake it, and we eventually fell back upon Mr. Neville Chamberlain. He was appointed in a hurry, as I had to announce the appointment in the House of Commons in my speech on the policy of the new Government. I had never seen him, and I accepted his qualifications for the post on the recommendation of those who had heard of his business and municipal experience.

*War Cabinet  
proposals*

*Mr. Neville  
Chamberlain  
selected*

What ensued from the decision of the Cabinet to extend the principle of compulsion to industries during the War illustrates the insuperable difficulties encountered not only here, but in every belligerent country, in applying conscription to workers in factories and workshops.

The discussions of Mr. Henderson with his colleagues in the Labour Party had important consequences, for when we resumed discussion of the matter on 19th December, he reported to us that the antagonism of organised labour to the proposal of industrial conscription was so strong that it would be very difficult to introduce, and might lead to widespread disturbance and disaffection. We had only with the utmost difficulty succeeded in coaxing the skilled workers of the country to accept measures of dilution of labour and relaxation of their Trade Union restrictions. These concessions had been enshrined in bargains ratified by such measures as the Munitions of War Acts, and the late Government had given pledges against industrial conscription as the price. If the organised skilled workers united to oppose compulsion in industry, it would be a mistaken policy to attempt to carry it out, even had it been feasible to do so. National unity alone could pull us through. By this step we should encounter the hostility of organised masses. Accordingly the Cabinet agreed that having regard to the feeling of organised labour on the subject of industrial compulsion, and the pledges given by the late Government, and to the volume of preliminary work necessary for the creation of an adequate and efficient machinery, local and central, it would be necessary to proceed, in the first

*Labour vetoes  
industrial  
compulsion*

*Initial  
system to be  
voluntary*



instance, on the lines of voluntary enrolment and transference of labour without a Bill.

We further agreed that, in the statement to be made to the Houses, an assurance should be given that Labour would be associated with any organisation which it was decided to establish under the Director of National Service, and that no time limit should be fixed for the introduction of compulsion, but that the Prime Minister (in the Commons) and Lord Curzon (in the Lords) should make it clear that, if the voluntary effort failed, the Government would ask Parliament to release them from any pledges heretofore given on the subject of industrial compulsion, and to furnish them with adequate powers for rendering their proposals

*Compulsion held in reserve* effective. In the meantime, it would be the duty of the Director to set up for voluntary enrolment and transference, machinery which might hereafter serve the purpose of compulsion, if compulsion became necessary.

The Secretary of State for War wished to have it put on record that, in order to maintain the drafts, not less than 100,000 men fit for general service must be obtained during January, and that in his opinion it would soon become necessary for the Government to introduce an amending Military Service Bill.

At the disposal of the new Ministry was the experience already accumulated by the recruiting machinery, and by the Man-Power Distribution Board, which had for some time been functioning as an agency for keeping track of the available labour in the country, and furnishing workers to the establishments and departments engaged on Government business. The business of the new Director

*Existing machinery*

was to organise as swiftly and as completely as possible a voluntary enrolment of all the available labour in the country, and at the same time to compile a census of the labour requirements of the nation's industries and activities, tabulating these in order of their importance for our war effort ; so that on the one hand we might be able to know exactly where to lay our hands on the men needed for the Army, and on the other hand, might be able promptly to replace any taken from urgently important work by other men or women who were surplus or potentially surplus in less important occupations.

Mr. Neville Chamberlain was in short charged with the task of creating machinery capable of controlling and distributing in the most economical and effective manner the whole man-power of the country. To begin with, the man-power he would actually have at his disposal would, for civil purposes, be only so much of the whole as could be induced to volunteer, though for military purposes his field covered every fit man of military age. But both the previous Cabinet and my own had approved in principle the introduction of compulsory universal national service, and if voluntary enrolment failed, we were prepared to accord Mr. Chamberlain further powers ; so that he was required to construct his machinery in such a way that it could function efficiently as an instrument in charge of all the nation's man-power.

The right to conscript for the Army involved an indirect measure of universal compulsion for all fit men of military age for all national purposes. Unless a man were both needed and actually employed on some essential service at home, he was liable to be

*Mr. Chamberlain's task*

*National compulsion secured by conscription*

drafted into the Army or Navy. Everyone, whatever his avocation or station, knew that, and this knowledge was not without its influence on national discipline and efficiency. It was at the back of men's minds ever since the obligation of military service became compulsory, that if they were not fulfilling their duties as citizens in the spheres where they would be of the greatest use to their country, they would be needed in France or elsewhere in the fighting lines, and would have to go if called up.

The decision having been taken to work the National Service scheme, in the first instance, on a voluntary basis, I did what I could to help Mr. Chamberlain to make a good start. On 10th January, 1917, the War Cabinet decided to dissolve the Man-Power Distribution Board, and transfer all its functions and archives to the new Ministry. At the same time we asked the new Director to prepare for our consideration a statement of the operations he contemplated, the measures he believed necessary for securing co-ordination with the various Departments concerned with labour, and the powers he would require for the purpose. Two days later I called a conference at which Lord Milner, Mr. Henderson and myself with the Director of National Service, met the President of the Local Government Board, the President of the Board of Agriculture and the Minister of Labour, to enable Mr. Chamberlain to review with these Ministers the implications of his task, and the manner in which his organisation could best function. As a result of our discussion, he was asked to prepare a memorandum, setting out :—

- (a) His proposals with regard to the organisation,

central and local, required for obtaining and enrolling National Service Volunteers ;

(b) The method contemplated for allocating volunteers to different branches of National Service, including relations with employers and scales of payment, with special regard to the possibility of the same organisation being hereafter required for compulsory purposes ;

(c) The measures to be taken for meeting the requirements of the Army in recruits.

Mr. Neville Chamberlain's Memorandum was forthcoming on 19th January, 1917, on which date it was carefully examined by the War Cabinet. It was in two parts, the first dealing with the supply of men to the Army, and the second with the proposed organisation of the Ministry for enrolling the civil population and allocating labour where it was most wanted. To meet the demands of the Army for recruits, his chief proposal was to withdraw exemptions from all fit men up to the age of 22 by a General Order, to which the fewest possible exceptions should be allowed. There would also have to be a further combing-out of those employed in the less essential industries. For the organisation of National Service he set out a scheme of headquarters staff and District Commissioners, and proposed to take over the Labour Exchanges as his instrument for effecting the actual transfer of volunteers to the industries where they were chiefly needed. As regards further powers, he asked for authority to settle all questions relating to the use and transfer of male and female civilian labour, and for the right to issue Orders and Regulations and create the requisite machinery for the work.

*Mr.  
Chamberlain's  
Memorandum*

The War Cabinet made several modifications in this scheme. We authorised the calling-up of 30,000 men from Agriculture, 20,000 from Mining and 50,000 semi-skilled and unskilled workers from Munitions, and outside these groups, the calling-up of all young men from 18 to 22 years of age. But the Employment Exchanges should remain under the Minister of Labour, who would place them at the disposal of the Minister of National Service for organising his scheme. We asked Mr. Chamberlain to revise his scheme along the lines we indicated.

*Modifications  
of scheme by  
the Cabinet*

On 6th February, 1917, the national appeal for voluntary enrolment of the population under the National Service scheme was launched at a meeting at the Central Hall, Westminster, where Mr. Neville Chamberlain outlined his proposals, and I delivered a speech warmly endorsing them.

*Recruiting  
campaign  
launched*

Mr. Chamberlain appealed to the whole civilian population between the ages of 18 and 61 to enrol for National Service (with the exception of doctors and ministers of religion, for whose services special arrangements were being made). A separate department for Women's National Service was being set up under the Ministry, with Mrs. H. J. Tennant at its head. War munition volunteers were included in the appeal, though they would not be transferred as a result of their registration to other work. Volunteers would be allocated to the work for which their training best fitted them—as far as possible in their home district. Rates of pay would be those prevailing in the job they undertook, with a minimum

*Mr. Chamber-  
lain's state-  
ment of appeal*

of 25s. a week, and a subsistence grant if they had to live away from home.

Mr. Chamberlain pointed out there were practically no men unemployed, so there would have to be a restriction of non-essential trades to provide workers to take the place of men called to the Army from essential trades. He suggested that without absolutely closing down any trades, such economy might be secured by pooling their resources of machinery, labour and materials as would free men from the less essential trades and yet leave them stronger after the War than before.

On 22nd February the Ministry of National Service Bill was introduced into the House of Commons to define the status and duties of the Director, and give him powers of making orders and regulations. It received the Royal Assent on 28th March.

*Ministry of  
National  
Service Bill*

The debates on it showed that there was a great deal of anxiety in some quarters lest any system of industrial compulsion should be imposed, and specific pledges were given and incorporated in the Act that compulsion would not be introduced without further Parliamentary sanction.

A considerable publicity scheme was carried out by Mr. Chamberlain to press home his appeal for volunteers. The fullest Governmental support was accorded to him in the hope that his efforts would succeed in placing our man-power problem upon a satisfactory basis, and constructing an efficient and smooth-running organisation to deal with it.

Our hopes were not realised. The Ministry of National Service was, it must be frankly confessed, a great disappointment, especially during the early months of its existence. Labouring under the handicap

of the voluntary system by which it was being operated, it failed to achieve the ends for which it was set up ; but more *Disappointing results* serious was the fact that it showed little sign that it would have worked efficiently if it had been granted compulsory powers.

The difficulties with which it was faced were admittedly immense. The fit men of military age still engaged in civilian occupations had *Difficulties of the Ministry* either been exempted because they were engaged in work of vital national importance, or on some special exceptional ground. The employers from whom it was proposed to withdraw them fought to the last ditch for their continued exemption, and were most unwilling to consider taking on other less experienced labour in their stead. The Unions to which they belonged similarly opposed their withdrawal, and the further dilution which substitute labour would involve. To provide such substitute labour meant robbing those industries and employments which were deemed to be less vital to our national effort, and if it was a ticklish matter to make such a black list, it was no less difficult to induce the businesses concerned to accept their own repression. And although Mr. Chamberlain had been accorded the co-operation of the employment exchanges, he was not successful in making smooth-working arrangements by which these should carry out the very important task of placing transferred labour in its new employment.

The result was a great deal of muddle and confusion. Stories got about of men who had volunteered for National Service ; had been thereupon instructed to throw up their present jobs, and hold themselves at the disposal of the Director ; and having done

so, found themselves waiting about for weeks, without work or wages. The effect was, of course, to check voluntary enrolment. Mean-  
*Muddle and* time the War Office was complaining  
*confusion* that it was not getting the men which it had been promised under the scheme.

Nothing like the full number of recruits that had been promised from Agriculture, Railways, Mines and Munitions in January were actually forthcoming by the end of May. Nor, on the other hand, was the substitute labour and the assistance from the forces of the Home Defence Army which had been promised to agriculture actually furnished on the agreed scale.

Voluntary enrolment was definitely disappointing. Of those who put down their names, three-fifths were  
*Meagre* already engaged in work of vital impor-  
*response to* tance, and less than half of the remainder  
*appeal for* were suitable for employment in the  
*volunteers* trades for which workers were most needed by the country. Mr. Chamberlain had appealed in the first instance for the enrolment of at least half a million men. After two months, less than a third of this number had been obtained. On 17th April, 1917, Mr. Bridgeman stated in Parliament in reply to a question :—

“ Out of 163,161 Volunteers dealt with by the Employment Exchanges up to 6th April (the latest date for which complete figures are available), 93,622 were definitely known to be in trades of primary importance or otherwise not available for various reasons ; 26,873 out of the balance of 69,539 were, from experience or physique, *prima facie* suitable for work in trades of primary importance in which there is a considerable demand



for male labour ; it cannot at present be stated how many of this total of 26,873 are engaged on work of national importance and are free for transfer. Over 16,000 Volunteers have been offered to employers, of whom 2,804 have started work and 11,826 were awaiting replies from employers. In addition, 5,765 were awaiting decision by National Service Sub-Commissioners of protest against transfer."

There is no disguising the unsatisfactory implication of these figures. The net result to date of the setting-up of a big Department at St. Ermin's, and of the appointment of officials all over the country, and of £60,000 spent on publicity, was the placing in employment of less than 3,000 men. There had been, of course, a good deal of useful work inaugurated by this Department, which was later to bear fruit—in particular, the organisation of women's service by the Women's Branch under Mrs. Tennant, which gave us the W.A.A.C.'s and the Land Girls. But as an instrument for dealing with our manpower problem, for furnishing the needed recruits for the Army and filling their places at home with substitute labour, the new Ministry of National Service was not a success.

The Cabinet was fully alive to this unsatisfactory state of affairs, and several efforts were made to help the new Department to tackle its job, but they were all futile. A vein of self-sufficient obstinacy in the new Minister contributed to the difficulties that baffled all our endeavours.

There was a general feeling amongst all who were set to investigate the cause of the failure of the new

Department that it was being run in a narrow spirit of unimaginative officialism and that its limbs were bound in a tangle of red tape which kept it from getting ahead with its job. *Too much red tape* Constant attempts were made by me and by others to infuse a new spirit into the Department by the introduction of men of a more suitable type into the work, especially on the publicity side. Mr. Chamberlain regarded these suggestions as involving an aspersion on the men he had chosen for the purpose—all able men for other tasks. He stubbornly resisted every proposal made to him for improving and strengthening the Department in certain directions where it was patently deficient.

The machinery which Mr. Chamberlain created showed itself incompetent to deal even with volunteer recruits, and certainly too unreliable to be entrusted with the administration of dictatorial powers. Possibly the task would have been beyond any man's ability. It called for a great breadth and boldness of conception, a remorseless energy and thoroughness of execution, and for the exercise of supreme tact in dealing with other Departments, notably the recruiting machinery and the Ministries of Labour, Munitions, Agriculture and Trade, in order to avert friction, jealousies and the stranglehold of red tape. *A giant task* We needed, in short, a man of exceptional gifts. A man may possess very considerable ability without qualifying for that definition. Mr. Neville Chamberlain is a man of rigid competency. Such men have their uses in conventional times or in conventional positions, and are indispensable for filling subordinate posts at all times. But they are lost in an emergency or in creative tasks at any time.

On 13th July, 1917, the War Cabinet had under consideration a Report by Mr. Neville Chamberlain, urging the cancellation of Government exemptions to every man in the younger classes ; and in support of this proposal he declared that there were at present so few vacancies to fill that if his proposal were not adopted, " he did not see that there was much object in the continued existence of his Department."

On the 13th August, 1917, Mr. C. Beck, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry, stated in reply to a question :—

" The expenditure of the National Service Department from the commencement of the Department to 1st August was £192,709 6s. 1d.

*Cost of the  
Ministry*

Of this, approximately £87,000 was spent on the publicity campaign under the original scheme of National Service.

The number of volunteers placed in employment since the commencement of the Department is 19,951. In addition, the services of 9,817 part-time workers have been utilised, and the Department has carried out the distribution of 68,595 soldiers and civilians whose services have been lent for agricultural work. The number of women who have been placed in various forms of employment is 14,256, making a total of 112,609 men and women whose services have been utilised by the Department."

Critically examined, it was not perhaps a very heroic record for the Department, but it had rendered some help in an important need. Parliament did not however deem the help adequate to the need or the cost. A Select Committee appointed by the House of

Commons on 25th July, 1917, to consider possible Government economies reported with regard to the Ministry of National Service that its system of filing and correspondence could with advantage be simplified ; that its staff could be housed in a smaller area and that some of the salaries were needlessly high ; and in general that :—

*Strictures  
of Select  
Committee*

“ The Committee are of opinion that the results obtained were not commensurate with the preparations made and the heavy preliminary outlay of money.”

Early in August, Mr. Neville Chamberlain resigned his position at the head of the Ministry of National Service, which was thereupon reconstructed. The organisation of recruiting was transferred to it, and Sir Auckland Geddes was made Director-General in place of Mr. Chamberlain. He brought with him from the War Office General Hutchison (now Lord Hutchison), who afforded him helpful and tactful assistance. Shortly afterwards a clear and definite agreement was reached between the Ministry of National Service and the Ministry of Labour as to the precise division and inter-connection of their functions, and this was set out in a memorandum that was duly examined and approved by Lord Milner's Committee on Man-Power and Recruiting, and was further confirmed by the War Cabinet on 12th September, 1917. The memorandum covered questions such as those of general labour supply, priority, schemes of enrolment, allocation, transfer and substitution of labour, Trade Committees, out-

*Sir Auckland  
Geddes  
takes over*

of-work benefit, imported labour, and so on. Lord Milner's Committee appended a Note on the functions of the Ministry of National Service which may be regarded as describing its operations from this time forward. These functions were :—

(1) To review the whole field of British manpower and to be in a position at all times to lay before the War Cabinet information as to the meaning, in terms of manpower and consequential results, of all Departmental proposals put forward to the War Cabinet and referred to the Ministry for its consideration and for an expression of its opinion.

*Revised basis  
of Ministry's  
activities*

(2) To make arrangements for the transfer from civil work not declared by the War Cabinet to be of primary importance, or, if ordered by the War Cabinet, from the Navy, Army, or Air Service to urgent national work, of such numbers of men as may be declared by the War Cabinet to be necessary to reinforce the labour already engaged on that work.

(3) Subject to the approval of the War Cabinet, to determine, in consultation with the Departments concerned, the relative importance of the various forms of civil work, and to prepare from time to time lists of reserved occupations with such age and other limitations as may be necessary to secure the preservation of a nucleus of civil occupations and industries.

(4) Within numerical limits imposed by the War Cabinet to obtain for the Army, Navy and Air Service, such men as can be withdrawn from civil life without detriment to the due performance of the civil work necessary to maintain the forces

at sea, in the field, and in the air, and any nucleus of civil occupations and industries declared by the War Cabinet to be necessary.

(5) In connection with Function 4, to determine the physical fitness of men available, or possibly becoming available, for withdrawal from civil life.

(NOTE.—Functions 4 and 5 are limited by the action of the Tribunals acting in conformity with regulations and instructions issued to them under authority derived from the War Cabinet, in England and Wales by the Local Government Board, in Scotland by the Scottish Office.)

(6) To make arrangements for the provision, where necessary, of labour (male and female) in substitution for that withdrawn from civil life in accordance with Function 4.

(7) Any other duty which may from time to time be allocated to the Ministry by the War Cabinet.

(8) The above statement of functions is not intended to override in any way any agreement that has been or may be made between the Ministry of National Service and any other Government Department.

Thenceforward the Ministry worked smoothly and efficiently along these lines. Its tasks were of increasing difficulty, as the problems alike of securing fresh recruits for the Army and of maintaining the labour supply of the country grew more acute, and were accentuated by labour unrest. Here is an illustration of some of the difficulties experienced owing to the germs that swept across from Russia and produced feverish symptoms everywhere. In mid-October, 1917, the Cabinet learned that the situation in the

*Growth of  
labour  
difficulties*

South Wales coal-field was serious. Anti-war elements among the miners were organising resistance to the combing-out of recruits for the Army. Sir Auckland Geddes appealed for our help, as the mines represented the last great pool for men both for the Army and for transferable labour. We decided to support his action to the full ; and as we learned that the more patriotic leaders of the miners in South Wales had suggested a visit from General Smuts, we asked the General if he would address a meeting at Mountain Ash at an early date. He consented to do so.

General Smuts tells the story of his adventure in the South Wales volcanic area. Before he went, he asked me if I could give him any advice *Smut's visit to* as to the line to take. I seem to have said *South Wales* to him : "Remember that my fellow countrymen are great singers !" The hint stuck. It was the only advice I gave him. What followed can perhaps be best told in his own words :—

"I arrived at Cardiff the next morning, where they gave me a great reception. I became a Doctor of the University. That afternoon I went on to the coal-fields where I was due to arrive that night. I found that practically the whole way from Cardiff to the coal-fields was lined by mobs on strike. But they were interested to see this man from South Africa. I really think they expected me to be a black man, and they seemed very much astonished that I was not. I got out everywhere and made little speeches. Finally I arrived at Tonypandy, which was the centre of this great strike. There I had my first meeting of the series which had been arranged for me to address. In

front of me there was a vast crowd numbering thousands and thousands of angry miners, and when I got up I could feel the electricity in the air.

I started by saying : ‘ Gentlemen, I come from far away as you know. I do not belong to this country. I have come a long way to do my bit in this war, and I am going to talk to you to-night about this trouble. But I have heard in my country that the Welsh are among the greatest singers in the world, and before I start, I want you first of all to sing to me some of the songs of your people.’

Like a flash, somebody in that huge mass struck up ‘ Land of My Fathers ’. Every soul present sang in Welsh and with the deepest fervour. When they had finished, they just stood, and I could see that the thing was over. I could judge the effect on myself. I said : ‘ Well, Gentlemen ! It is not necessary for me to say much here to-night. You know what has happened on the Western Front. You know your comrades in their tens of thousands are risking their lives. You know that the Front is not only in France, but that the Front is just as much here as anywhere else. The trenches are in Tonypandy, and I am sure you are actuated by the same spirit as your comrades over in France. It is not necessary for me to add anything. You know it as well as I do, and I am sure that you are going to defend the Land of your Fathers of which you have sung here to-night, and that you will defend it to the uttermost—and that no trouble you may have with the Government about pay or anything else will ever stand in the way of your defence of the Land of your Fathers.’



That was all I said. I do not think I spoke for more than a few minutes. I went on to the next meeting and repeated the same thing there, and so right on through the coal-fields. That night I took the train back to London in time to attend the Cabinet the next afternoon. They said to me : ' What has happened ? All the men are at work. How did you settle it ? ' I said, ' Well, it is news to me that the men are at work.' That great song helped us to win through at the very moment when a paralysing blow was being struck at us—when we were being told by our Navy that they only had reserves of coal for a week, and if this strike went on for another week, we should be paralysed and finished. It was then that ' Land of My Fathers ' saved us."

Anxious moments such as this strike outbreak were all too frequent in our experience during the War, and the Ministry of National Service had to mingle the utmost tact with its firmness in order to carry through its essential task.

Strikes and the Labour unrest which characterised 1917 aggravated our difficulties with man-power. But had there been no labour troubles, the number of fit men available for indispensable duties was not equal to every need. It was certainly not commensurate with the growing demand. The slaughter of Passchendaele added to these difficulties. As I shall

*Military waste of man-power in 1917* point out when I come to relate the story of that bloody battle, or series of battles, the French had deliberately chosen a fighting policy which would save their men for the final struggle of 1918 when America would be ready to join in. Our Generals had deliberately

chosen the opposite policy of flinging masses of our troops against concrete machine-gun emplacements, with the result that hundreds of thousands were put out of action. Then they demanded the replacement of the lost units which ought not to have been wasted in such a fight. As far back as May, 1917, we had repeatedly warned our military leaders that we should have no men available in 1917 for any great enterprises involving heavy casualties. They disregarded this intimation, and thereby added considerably to the trouble we were experiencing in finding sufficient men for the urgent needs of the nation on land and sea, at home and abroad. How we were hampered by the shortage in our life and death struggle against starvation is told in the chapters on Food and Shipbuilding. Without the Department of National Service we could not have solved the problems of making the best use of our manpower. It made a clumsy start, but when it was reorganised it handled its delicate and troublesome duties efficiently and well.

## CHAPTER XLVI

### MILITARY OUTLOOK FOR 1917

#### I. EXISTING STRATEGICAL PLANS

AMONGST the first duties that fell to the Cabinet was a survey of the military position, with a view to deciding whether any reconsideration of the plans agreed to by the late Government for the campaign of 1917 was desirable or possible.

As I have been subjected to much adverse criticism for not insisting upon a complete reversal of the strategical policy hitherto pursued, it is necessary that I should at this stage review the military situation as I found it when I took office.

*Difficulty of reversing strategical policy*

When I took over the civilian direction of the War as Prime Minister, the conditions under which the struggle was to continue had been already irrevocably fixed by decisions or failures to decide, against which I had made unceasing but unavailing protests at every step.

Our great commanders, having refused or neglected to organise a break-through where and when it was feasible, and having made ineffective attempts on fronts where such rupture was impossible, thereby throwing away myriads of valuable lives and losing inestimable time and opportunity, being unable to think out anything more original, had fallen back

*Military staffs assume docility of cannon-fodder*

on attrition—always the game of the poor player. This is how the proposition presented itself to them :—

“The Allies have five men for every three the enemy can put in the field ; therefore, even if we spend four lives in extinguishing three, the foe must be beaten in the end.”

The possibility never entered into the computation of these master minds that the survivors might sooner or later object to this method of “forming fours” by taking their turn in the slaughter house from which such multitudes of their comrades never emerged. These arid strategists only saw that the units they commanded had for three consecutive campaigns marched into the death zone without flinching, and that to the very end of the terrible battles of 1916 they never faltered or hesitated, in spite of the fact that already 12 millions of them were dead or mutilated. Why, therefore, should the survivors now shrink from the fate which their fellows had confronted with such fortitude and resignation ?

With each campaign, the opportunities for trying the policy of attacking the enemy where he was most vulnerable became bricked up by the *Danube Front* enemy, and had now narrowed down to *closed to us* the extreme east and to the Italian Front.

Up till the autumn of 1915 the Balkan door was kept wide open by the Serbian Army, one of the best fighting units in the field. The failure of the Dardanelles attack, the refusal to exploit the Salonika base, and the abandonment of Serbia bolted and barred that door : the defeat of Roumania and the impending collapse of Russia would soon eliminate the last possibilities of the Near East.

The opportunities—nay, rather the openings—of the Danube Front had been fooled away. The chances of utilising the gigantic man-power of Russia had almost vanished—had in effect gone, although at that date no one grasped the ominous fact. Was there any other chance left except once more to sprinkle the western portal of the temple of Moloch with blood from what remained of the most valiant hearts amongst the youth of France and Britain? I decided to explore every possibility before surrendering to a renewal of the horrors of the West.

At the Chantilly Military Conference in November, 1916, the Generals had gone through the form of pretending that a break through the Balkan barrier was still attainable, and that they contemplated an operation to that end for the early spring. They led the politicians to believe that there was a fair chance even then of breaking through on the South-Eastern Front, and effectively attacking the armies of the Central Powers on their flank, thus driving them out of Roumania, and establishing a clear line of communication with both Roumania and Russia in that quarter. I felt certain that they never meant it, for they never took any measures to prepare for so formidable a military enterprise. It was all a piece of humbug, written with a chuckle at the thought of the ease with which the politicians assembled at that time in Paris could be taken in. They made no arrangements to send the reinforcements, guns, or munitions essential to a vigorous offensive. They did not even make any effort to fill up the gaps in the units already there. It was at least nominally part of the Chantilly strategy to undertake an offensive in the Balkans with the Danube as its

*Sham scheme  
at Chantilly  
for Balkan  
offensive*

objective. But although the Paris Conference in November had endorsed the plan proposed by the Allied Military Staffs, no action of any sort or kind had been taken to implement it. In men, guns, ammunition and transport the situation of the Salonika force was if anything worse than it had been before the Chantilly decision. An effort of that kind, had it been made immediately with all the available strength of the Western Powers, might have succeeded. General Milne (now Field-Marshal Lord Milne), who was then in command of the British forces at Salonika, in a recent speech confirms this appreciation of the military position. He says that "the reason why he had kept them for so long doing nothing on the Salonika Front was because he was not given the means that he considered necessary, and which he had asked for, to enable them to enter into battle with any hope of success. Soldiers could not go into war and expect to win without most fearful sacrifices if the authorities at home did not properly back them up with every means at their disposal."

It was probably too late then to achieve the rescue of Roumania from the wolves that were tearing at her entrails. The Western Allies had almost forced her into the War without taking the trouble of ascertaining whether she was equipped for such an enterprise, and without making any preparations for coming to her aid if she were hard pressed. General Alexieff was opposed to the Roumanian intervention. He knew how ill-prepared was the Roumanian Army to resist the forces that would be brought to bear upon it by the Central Powers. He also realised that upon his own exhausted armies would fall the work of rescue

*The  
Roumanian  
muddle*

when Roumania was being crushed by her powerful foes. But although he was more concerned with the decision than any other Allied General, he was not consulted. So much for the common front about which we heard so much at the Paris Conference in the booming rhetoric of M. Briand and Mr. Asquith.

All the same, if timely action had been taken immediately after Chantilly, it might have completely transformed the situation to the advantage of the Allies. Austria, menaced on three flanks, would undoubtedly have collapsed. The Russian Army could have been regenerated and re-inspired. The Germans would have been forced to withdraw masses of their best troops from the Western Front to support a crumbling Austria. As usual, no effort was made to carry out this bold plan. It was nothing more than a show to delude the Ministers into an acceptance of the same old strategy. The only front that was attacked was the political. The moment that was captured, the Staffs reported to each other, to use a military phrase, "Our objectives have been attained." They might have added "The casualties were slight," but that phrase was not to be found in their pigeon-holes. Casualties there were, however; Joffre, who designed this manœuvre, fell as a result of it and the Asquith Government, which acquiesced in it, also went.

By January, 1917, the Roumanian overthrow had entirely altered the Balkan position. The complete defeat of the Roumanian Army and the occupation of the more important Roumanian towns, and especially of the corn fields, demolished the Allied military plans and strengthened the position of the Central Powers, whilst it undoubtedly worsened and weakened

*Roumania's  
fall fatal  
to Russia*

the strategical position of the Allies—notably Russia. Her isolation was almost complete at a time when she needed help and comradeship more than ever. Roumania was no longer a menace to an Austrian flank needing cover and protection. Her overthrow was the final and fatal blow to Russia. The prodigious effort put forth by the exhausted Muscovite Army to support its unfortunate ally left Russia prostrate and panting. Her already insufficient transport facilities were still further strained. Her long line of front, which she had not enough trained and equipped men to defend, was stretched by hundreds of kilometres. One fourth of Russia's fighting men had to be sent to the Roumanian Front. The last ounce of her fighting strength was spent in the effort, and her strained heart never recovered sufficient vigour to enable her to stand up to her victorious foes. All hope of a Russian revival was buried on the banks of the Pruth, and the Moldavian Delta became the cemetery of the Empire of the Romanoffs. The Roumanian collapse moreover had placed the Central Powers economically in a much better position. It eased the pressure of the blockade and gave them further time and encouragement to push their submarine campaign. Ludendorff points out that the occupation of the Roumanian corn-lands and oil-fields placed the Central Powers "in occupation of an area rich in just those warlike resources which they lacked" and referring to the Roumanian stores they captured he says: "As I saw now quite clearly, we should not have been able to exist, much less carry on the War, without Roumania's corn and oil, even though we had saved the Galician oil-fields of Drohobycz from the Russians." He boasts with

*Advantages  
reaped by  
Central  
Powers*



justifiable pride of how "a 'serious crisis in Constantinople was fortunately averted by the timely delivery of Roumanian wheat."

Instead of a road being blasted through by the Allies from Salonika to Galatz and thence to Moscow, a new road had been opened up by the Central Powers through Rustchuck and Adrianople right up to the Ægean. The momentous change which had taken place since Chantilly in the strategic situation in the Balkans was brought home to the Allies by the introduction of a new element and a fresh menace in that quarter. We soon discovered that instead of planning an offensive expedition of a considerable

*Danger  
threatening  
in Greece*

magnitude, we were confronted with a danger to the very existence of our Expeditionary Force at Salonika. Tension with the Greek Government had recently become acute. In Greece, Constantine, the Kaiser's brother-in-law, was once more on top. He had been playing fast and loose with the Allies, and there was good reason to believe that his real sympathies were with Germany, and that he would seize any opportunity that offered to further her interests and incidentally his own. He had a sentimental interest in Monastir, the scene of his easy triumphs in the Balkan War. Venizelos, the loyal friend of the Allies, because of that friendship was a refugee from his country and a rebel against his King. His followers had formed a provisional Government that held sway in Crete and a number of the Greek islands, and in the Salonika district; but they were being barbarously treated whenever they fell into the power of the Royalist Government. Information reached the French Staff that the Germans were meditating a coup against the Salonika Expeditionary Force.

According to the intelligence reaching their Headquarters, the enemy were organising a combined attack by Turks, Bulgarians, Germans and Austrians—and most sinister of all, by Greeks—upon our scattered, depleted, ill-placed and badly-equipped army. Whilst the victorious forces of the Central Powers were to dash down from the hills to the north and to the east, a Greek army was to attack the Allied flank from the south. There was evidence that could not be disregarded of the substantial character of this rumour. Constantine was massing troops in Northern Thessaly. For what purpose, unless they meant to attack? They were not assembled to help the threatened armies of the Allies. There was a good deal of military activity throughout the Greek Peninsula. Constantine detested the Allies. His contest with Venizelos deepened that hatred by making Allied or German sympathies a party question. The vulnerability of Greece from the sea kept him, at an earlier stage, from joining Ferdinand, whose dominions were immune from naval attack. A certain clash of ulterior ambitions about Thrace and Constantinople might also have had a deterrent effect. These considerations restrained any impulse he might feel to allow animosity to ferment into risky action. But if the risk were reduced to a minimum by a smashing attack from the north and the infliction on the Allies at Salonika of another Dardanelles disaster, then Constantine would welcome his friends and in all probability join their victorious forces. In Athens and the Peloponnesus he had a powerful following, and there hostility soon reached the point of explosion. It spread up to Athens. On 11th December, 1916, there was an attack on British sailors in the Piræus

which resulted in several of our marines being killed. The French clamoured, and as General Joffre put it in a message to our War Office, "emphatically insisted" that we should send a couple of divisions immediately to Salonika. Prompt action was essential to dispel this new threat. We obviously could take no risk, for the situation, unless effectively handled, might land the Allies in one of the worst disasters of the whole War.

The War Cabinet felt that the Greek menace must be dealt with firmly and promptly before the Central Powers could disentangle their troops from the struggle with the remnants of the Roumanian Army which were, with the help of a few Russian divisions, still putting up a tenacious resistance in Moldavia, and before the Greek King could mass a sufficient force in the neighbourhood of Larissa to enable him to deliver an effective blow on the Allied left. The French Government and their military advisers were in a state of panic about the Salonika force. They were convinced that the enemy attack was imminent. General Sarrail was all for military action to clear the Greeks out of Thessaly. The French Staff continued to press us for a reinforcement of two divisions without delay. We pointed out that the force already there was many thousands below its strength, because the necessary sea transport was not forthcoming, either here or in France. If ships could be found anywhere and anyhow, let them be used to carry drafts and ammunition to fill up the divisions and equip the batteries. Meanwhile we advised that it would be better to anticipate the Constantine manœuvre by forcing the issue with that potential antagonist before his potential allies

*Policy of  
British  
Government*

were ready. It was therefore decided by the War Cabinet to deliver an ultimatum to him demanding the immediate withdrawal of the whole of the Greek Army in Thessaly to the Peloponnesus. He was given 24 hours in which to make up his mind. Had he refused he would have been immediately attacked by land and sea. The threat answered the purpose. Constantine promised compliance. At first there was a suspicious tardiness in his redemption of the promise. But a blockade by the British Fleet convinced him that his only security lay in speeding up the retirement of his Thessaly force. A portion of our anxiety about the situation at Salonika was thus relieved. It was, however, still felt that the strength of our forces there was insufficient and the positions they held were too weak to enable them to resist a serious attack from the victorious forces of the Central Powers in the Balkan Peninsula.

Consequently we proposed that the Italians, who had a shorter sea route, should send a couple of divisions across the Adriatic to Santi Quaranta, and that they should immediately take in hand the improvement of the communications between that port and Monastir. I record our negotiations on this issue in my account of the Rome Conference. If the Italians could not see their way to spare troops for the purpose, we suggested that arrangements should be made, in the event of a formidable attack by the enemy, for a retirement of the Allied Armies to prepared entrenchments in front of Salonika. Meanwhile we took steps to send drafts to restore to full strength units which had been thinned by sporadic fighting and by disease. The French con-

*An ultimatum  
to Constantine*

*Proposed  
Italian route  
to Monastir*

tingent was short of establishment and we pressed General Joffre to fill up the depleted ranks of his army. For the time being the idea of *Offensive from Salonika abandoned* an offensive from Salonika had to be abandoned. When the Roumanian Army of hundreds of thousands was in being and engaging corresponding enemy forces, a move from Salonika might have been feasible with moderate forces, especially if an earnest endeavour had been made to improve road, rail and dock facilities. But even if steps were taken now to assemble a much more formidable striking force at Salonika, it was too late to begin with any hope of accomplishing great results. During the weeks that had elapsed since Chantilly, the Roumanian Army had become negligible as an offensive force and had been reduced to a condition where a few enemy divisions could have held it in check. The British and French Staffs had not yet given a thought to the essential reconstruction of transport at Salonika except on a strictly limited scale. No survey had been made of what was required in rails and locomotives to improve communications to and behind the lines. Consequently no orders had been received for supplying any of these necessities. Even then success would depend upon the pressure Russia could bring to bear from the north. Until the projected conference at Petrograd took place we knew little of her offensive capacity.

The condition of the Salonika Expeditionary Force several weeks after the great Chantilly project of a Balkan offensive is another indication of the complete lack of unity and energy in the military direction. Joint action on the part of all the Allies was necessary, but was not palatable to the General Staff. A

resolution carried at the Allied Conference at Paris approving such a plan was treated as if it were the actual carrying out of the scheme. To that end an old legal maxim was incorporated as a principle of strategy. "Things that ought to be done or are agreed to be done must be taken as done." That probably accounts for the complete neglect by the military Staffs of some of the essential requirements of the Salonika Army. It drove poor Sarraill to his famous *mot*, "Napoleon was not a great general. He only fought a Coalition."

Whilst Joffre was engaged in fighting a rearguard action in Paris against the politicians who sought his life, and whilst Robertson was chuckling at the skilful way in which the British politicians had once more been jockeyed over the Balkans, the Germans, Austrians, Bulgarians and Turks were tearing up the Roumanian Army and pillaging and distributing Roumanian corn. Briand was too busy trying to save the last miserable rags of Joffre's authority to think of the War. The Asquith Government was no more, and the new Government had not had long to study the gigantic problems on sea and land which had been bequeathed to them. What about the military position on other fronts? We were committed by the Chantilly Conference to offensive operations in 1917 on a great scale on the French, Italian and Salonika Fronts. Russia had promised to co-operate by an attack on the Eastern Front. The cutting off of Roumania put the Salonika offensive out of the question. It was now assumed that we were doomed in that quarter to a precarious defensive—certainly until Russia succeeded in restoring the military position in Roumania. That was far beyond her strength to achieve.

But how about the campaign projected for the French and Italian war areas? Were the Chantilly plans still in force there? By these schemes another Somme offensive on a wider front was contemplated in France; in Italy there was to be the same old attack on Istria or the Trentino—on both fronts we were doomed to a repetition of the identical denting and chipping tactics to which we were accustomed, with each Ally acting independently on its own front. The only pretence at co-operation was to be found in an effort to time a simultaneous start of the useless slaughter of brave men on each front, each Allied country making its contribution to the holocaust. The campaigns of 1917 were to be another exhibition of platitudes in action, planned by minds too unimaginative or too tired to think of any variation or flourish.

It was late in the day to effect a complete change in the plan of campaign for 1917. That ought to have been done at the Paris Conference in November. If a charge of breach of faith was to be avoided (and such a charge, if believed, is fatal to an alliance), nothing could be done without obtaining the assent of the leaders of the four great Allied Armies. This was a hopeless prospect, for the Chantilly plans were their own and they naturally thought them the best. No change could be made without further consultation. How was effective consultation possible at this late hour? Any fundamental alteration of plans involved an admission of error on the part of these great warriors. Pressure from statesmen might force a thorough reconsideration. But was that pressure likely? Not from what I knew of the leading

*French and  
Italian plans  
unpromising*

*Allies  
committed  
at Chantilly*

Ministers of France, Italy and Russia. The French Premier was easy-going and indolent—devoid of initiative. If his genius discerned the right road, his temperament led him to acquiesce in the smoothest. The Italian Premier was an honest man of mediocre gifts. His most powerful colleague—Sonnino—was a strong man, but his strength lay entirely in the region of diplomacy. He had no aptitude for conducting a war. He had no special interest in the fighting branch of the business. As to Russia, it was presided over by a weak autocrat, who was ruled by a temperamental and superstitious wife, and internal troubles were surging round both.

In spite of unpropitious conditions I decided to make a much belated effort to save the Alliance from a repetition of the barren and bloody tragedies of 1915 and 1916. As I am bound, in an honest account of the events in which I took part, to tell the story faithfully, whether it ended in success or in failure, I propose now to relate the fruitless efforts I made to avert the horrors of the Chemin des Dames, Passchendaele, and Caporetto—also my last despairing attempt to postpone, if not save, the collapse of Russia.

## 2. CONDITIONS OF A SUCCESSFUL OFFENSIVE

The only conditions under which a great offensive operation could hope to succeed had been written in scarlet letters by the events of the War. It needed no special training or intelligence to read the warnings of past disaster.

The first condition was that the morale of the defending troops should have deteriorated, either because it had been undermined by constant defeat



or because for one reason or another its ardour was no longer equal to the continued strain upon its courage. This point is put with great force by Falkenhayn in discussing this very problem in reference to the German attacks on the Russian Front :—

*Break-through  
hopeless against  
resolute defence*

“ The attack in Galicia was not undertaken until the Germans felt certain that they were opposed by troops whose morale was absolutely rotted by a merciless campaign. In truth, this is the chief factor in the solution of the problem so often discussed during the War, whether attempts to break through with the object of forcing a decision constituted a wise policy or not. Against an enemy in good military and moral condition they were certainly not to be recommended. Accordingly, in the whole course of the War, breaks-through only succeeded where this condition was not present.”

Generals on both sides accepted this axiom, but they hardly ever gave it an honest application. When they were anxious to launch an offensive in a particular sector, they always attached undue importance to reports of deterioration in the morale of the enemy on that front. A mass of conflicting gossip and rumours came to the Intelligence Branch from every quarter, often from prisoners trying to deceive or anxious to please. When it was sifted and weighed, human nature being what it is, a bias developed in the direction of the reports that supported the thesis known to have been already formed by the High Command. The subordinate who declines to sacrifice judgment to a mistaken conception of loyalty is

*Biased use  
of information  
by Army  
Intelligence*

rarely acceptable except to the really great. Haig, Robertson and Nivelle all alike professed a conviction that the morale of the German Army had been shaken to such a degree by the raging fires of the Somme that its troops would no longer have the nerve to sustain a similar experience. There was a flood of secret information to that effect, coming mostly from terrified prisoners whose own nerves were temporarily shaken by experiences from which they had only just been rescued by captivity. The effect upon the spirit of the French troops of the repeated failures with numerous losses during 1915 and 1916 was never discussed as an element in the computation of chances. It was assumed that the Allied soldiers were infrangible steel, and enemy soldiers ordinary flesh. And yet in the event, French morale broke first. The two great offensives of 1917 were decided upon what turned out to be an entirely false estimate of the fighting quality of our greatest foe and of the limits of endurance of the Allied troops.

On other fronts, however, there was a distinct falling off in the spirit of the forces that opposed the Allied Armies in the case of two of the belligerents. Speaking of the Turkish Army at the end of 1916, Ludendorff says :

*False belief  
in German  
weakness*

*Real weakness  
of the Turk*

“ The Turkish Army was exhausted. To begin with, it had not recovered from the Balkan War before it was involved in another. Its wastage from disease and in action was continuously high. The trustworthy, brave Anatolian had vanished from its ranks. The unreliable Arab auxiliaries were playing an increasingly important part everywhere, but especially in Mesopotamia and Palestine.

The forces were now below their paper strength and the men were badly fed and still worse equipped. The lack of efficient officers was particularly felt."

It is one of the most serious condemnations of our war direction that we allowed such an army not merely to hold up superior numbers of our troops, but to inflict two serious defeats on them. There can be no doubt that a resolute and well-managed attack on the Turk in 1915 and certainly in 1916 would have crumpled him up and released the considerable forces locked in Egypt and Mesopotamia for a resolute attack on the Balkan Front. The saving in shipping alone would have made a substantial contribution to our resources. A Turkish overthrow in 1916 might have produced decisive results. In 1917 the consequence of such a victory, standing alone, would not have been as far reaching, unless followed by a defeat of the Bulgarian Army.

But if a concentrated attack on Austria-Hungary were considered as a possible objective of the 1917 campaign, the prospect of a triumph which would have a determining effect on the fate of the struggle seemed more promising. The German High Command at this date divided the Austrian troops into "reliable" and "unreliable," the latter being by far the more numerous. In the Brussiloff offensive of 1916, the Austrian Army put up no serious fight. Whole divisions surrendered without striking a blow. The "prisoners" alone numbered over 300,000. Hindenburg said it was not a surrender, but a betrayal. The heart of the Slavs and Roumans who constituted the majority of the Austrian conscripts was not in the struggle. Nor were the

Magyars as keen as the Austro-Germans. It is true that the Slavonic regiments preferred fighting Italians to Russians, but they were not specially concerned in the quarrel with either. The Magyar had some reason to dislike the Russian—none to excite his antagonism towards the Italians. There were no memories to inspire their hostility comparable to the secular hatreds of Gaul and Teuton that came to a climax in the implacable ferocity of the Verdun battlefield.

The food situation in Austria was also bad. The Hungarian harvest had failed and there was real starvation in considerable areas of the Austrian Empire. One of our secret agents from Spain, a country which was in close touch throughout the War with Vienna, and especially with the clerical interests in that country, reported that “the Austrians themselves are full of astonishment at the Allies not undertaking a proper offensive against them, as Austria’s collapse would then be inevitable.” From the same sources our Intelligence Bureau learnt that there was in Austria “great depression and eagerness for peace, even in the highest military circles.”

Austria made war to punish Serbia for a crime in which every Austrian and Magyar believed Serbian statesmen to be implicated. Serbia had now been trampled down and every square yard of Serbian territory was in Austrian or Bulgarian occupation. There was thus nothing left for which an Austrian peasant or workman would count it worth the risk of being shot to pieces on the battlefield, or of leaving his wife and children to die of starvation at home. The war objective had been achieved as

*Food shortage  
in Austria*

*War spirit  
waned in  
Austria*

far as Austria was concerned, and with it went the war spirit. That is why a determined attack on an imperfectly trained army raised from such unpromising material and crowded with "unreliables," had a better chance of success than an offensive against perfectly organised defensive positions, held by the most efficient army in the field—in training, equipment and leadership—and with a morale which, if not unabated, was equal to the best in any other army on any battlefield.

It is said that up to that date the Italian Army had made no extensive progress in its repeated assaults on the Austrian Army. The Italians had in fact advanced much further than we had at Loos or on the Somme, or the French at Artois, Champagne, and the Somme on much more favourable ground. They had lost fewer men, they had made greater progress, they had spent far less ammunition than either the French or British Armies, nevertheless the result was no more decisive than in the French and British offensives. But there was this vital difference, which was an element in any wise consideration of the possibilities of the terrain of the next offensive—the Italian artillery was inferior in every particular to that of their Austrian opponents, especially in heavy guns; and the supply of ammunition was insufficient, even for such guns as they had, to keep up the offensive to the point of decision. Not only was the artillery too light to level trenches hewn into the rocky plateau of the Carso, but it was often not equal to the task of destroying barbed wire defences. There were many critical occasions where "garden pincers" had to be used to make up for deficiencies in artillery preparation. Not even the

*Extent of  
Italian  
successes*

*Italian  
weakness in  
artillery*

most reckless and bigoted Western-offensive general would launch an attack on trenches dug in the friable soil of Champagne after a bombardment from artillery so light and so limited in shell supply as that with which the Italian Army had to force its way through defences blasted in the granite of the Julian Alps and the hard porphyry of the Dolomites. Far too little credit is given to the soldiers of the Italian Peninsula for what they achieved with such inadequate mechanical assistance. That they should have accomplished what they did is a proof not only of their own bravery and skill, but of the inferiority in military ardour and discipline of the half-hearted Austrian infantry to the dour and highly trained legionaries of the North German. The Gorizia offensive had to be broken off at the height of its success because the Italian ammunition was exhausted. Many a dominating position stormed by the Alpine troops of Italy had to be abandoned because the supporting artillery could not silence the long range guns of Austria by counter battery work. The Austrian victory of May, 1916, was won because the Austrians concentrated on the Italian line an overpowering fire from a mass of heavy guns which the Italian artillery could not match. It was said at the time that the Italian troops were "unaccustomed" to such fire, and therefore broke. It would be equally correct to say that the Austrians on the whole maintained their defence of the frontier, with forces conspicuously inferior in numbers, because they were not submitted to the shattering bombardments which effaced the German defences on the Somme, and the French forts and trenches at Verdun, and left the respective garrisons without cover on those scarified plateaux.

The Italian Army in 1916 strengthened its heavy artillery considerably by the withdrawal of siege guns from their coast and inland fortifications. But many of the patterns were obsolete. The range and mechanism were not equal to the perfect weapons turned out by Skoda, and such as they were, there was not enough ammunition to keep up a prolonged bombardment of successive positions. The Austrians therefore always experienced a sense of mechanical superiority which sustained their morale. But supposing the position were reversed, and the advantage in artillery were transferred to the Italians, would the unwilling soldiers of the "ramshackle empire" follow the example of the Germans, French and British on the Western Front and lie for hours and days in muddy shell holes to defend their battered defences? I felt confident they would not. Their devotion to the Austrian Empire was not equal to that display of sustained heroism. The pluck of the Croatian and the Czech had been proved in the wars of many centuries, but their hearts were not in this conflict, and it is the heart that gives constancy as well as ardour to courage.

Had the Austrians been beaten on the Italian Front it would have been imperative for them to withdraw several divisions and batteries from their Eastern Front. The Germans would therefore have to extend and thus weaken their lines on the same front. That would have eased the position for the hard-pressed Russians and Roumanians and would have given them time to reform and recover their fighting strength. In the alternative the Germans would have withdrawn divisions from France and made a break-through on that front a more feasible operation.

*Austrian  
artillery a  
substitute for  
morale*

*Probable effects  
of an Italian  
success*

It is true that the disastrous offensives of the Chemin des Dames and Passchendaele could not have been undertaken, had we moved guns and troops to Italy. The Generals would have been compelled to make that sacrifice to common sense. In what respect would we have been worse off if those sanguinary repulses had been avoided? They cost the Allies well over three-quarters of a million men, an overstrained mettle, shaken nerves and a shattered morale for the survivors. Had the Germans, instead of helping Austria, elected to take advantage of our depleted strength in the West to attack our entrenchments there, they would have been resisted by forces which would still have been superior to their own. All they would have gained by their attack would have been a repetition of Verdun whilst Austria was being abandoned to utter defeat. When the Germans in the summer of 1917, as soon as they heard of the mutinies in the French Army, attacked lines held by troops weakened, depressed and disaffected by their terrible losses, they were beaten off. If the French Army had been depleted by 150,000 efficients sent to Italy, why should it be assumed that the German assault would then have succeeded when it failed after the French numbers had been reduced by 200,000 casualties and the morale of the French Army had been shaken to its foundations? The Allied Staffs always seemed to me to argue with the incoherence and inconsequence with which children reason. What matters with them is the thing they want. Facts, figures, impossibilities are irrelevant things to be used either way and every way according to their desires.

*Avoiding  
Passchendaele*

*Childishness  
of conventional  
military  
argument*



If the Austrians were to be attacked by the Allied forces, the Germans would rush to their aid from the West with men and guns, and they could always send more help than we could. That was one argument. The other was that if the Austrians were subjected to a combined attack, the Germans would take advantage of the temporary improvement in relative strength to break through our reduced garrison in France. Both could not be true. But to the military mind these arguments were not an alternative—they were cumulative. To quote a very pertinent comment from the British Official History of the Macedonian Campaign :—

“ There is a great difference in the attitude of a General Staff to arguments according as they fit in or conflict with its own desires.”

### 3. SURPRISE

There was another consideration which in my opinion had not been sufficiently taken into account hitherto—a factor which even in the war of earth-works played a great part several times ; this was the element of surprise. It is safe to say that no striking success had hitherto been won except where the victor had managed to surprise the opposite army by an unexpected stroke or a stroke of unexpected strength. It was true up to the very end of the War.

None of the battles of the Great War was decisive in the sense of ending the struggle immediately one way or the other. But many of them were climacteric in their influence on the progress of the campaign, and could be reckoned as turning points, temporary or permanent, in the course of the War. They effected

*Some battles  
critically  
important*

a domination by one contestant over the other in some particular theatre or part of the line ; a definite gain of territory, considerable in proportion to the effort put forward and losses incurred ; often a breakthrough and temporary disintegration of hostile defences and forces. While the battles on the Western Front—after the first few weeks of open warfare—had the character of a grim wrestle between forces that moved slowly back or forward and remained substantially intact and invincible, the great battles fought in the Eastern and South-Eastern areas of the struggle ended in one side or the other being thrown into confusion and driven back for leagues in headlong rout.

*Part in them  
played by  
surprise* It is interesting to note the extent to which the element of surprise played a determining part in these critical engagements.

After the Marne, and when the badger tactics on both sides had been inaugurated and established, it was assumed that there would be no room for surprises on a great scale. The forces and resources of the respective combatants at any and every given point and time were known to their adversaries. Modern methods of observation and elucidation, aerial reconnaissance, trench raids, cross-examination of prisoners, highly developed systems of espionage, supplemented the other means of acquiring information as to the movements of each army. There seemed therefore to be no opportunity left for either side to carry out any strategical designs of which the other would be unaware, and against which it would not have timely notice to prepare itself up to the limit of its military resources.

*Difficulty of  
surprise in  
the West*

But although the unsuspected blow was difficult to achieve in the Great War, it was attainable. Both sides were able to spring surprises on each other, in regard to the time and place of their attacks, the disposition of their forces, and the weapons they employed. And it is noteworthy that the crucially successful operations of the War were mainly those where one side was not expecting an attack, or at least was unprepared for the enemy's offensive in the matter of its time, its place, or the weapons or weight of troops used. Where each side was fully alive to what the other might be expected to do, and had made such preparation as it could to meet attack, the general result was an indecisive and sanguinary struggle, with no appreciable gain or loss of territory, and no dramatic collapse of the defending troops.

There were many such bloody battles, yielding indeterminate gains. On the other hand, the most striking movements and notable victories were secured with the aid of at least some determining element of surprise.

It is quite impossible to conceal from the enemy every movement on a great scale, but a resourceful General can at any rate organise his activities behind the lines in such a way as to confuse even an intelligent enemy. If he has any knowledge of the mentality of the opposing General—and no man ought to be allowed to lead who does not possess supreme psychological gifts—his task is an easy one. When Joffre, Nivelle and Haig commanded on the Western Front, it needed no special genius to discern the trend of their one-way minds. They were each persuaded at all times that the enemy could not spare a battalion out

*Battles without  
surprise ele-  
ments indecisive*

*One-way  
minds of  
Allied Generals*

of the army that was defending its lines against their well-directed and sustained attacks. Thus Serbia, Roumania and Caporetto came to them as a surprise. The Germans were able to withdraw several divisions from France for those attacks, when Joffre and Haig were convinced that the offensive they were then prosecuting had reduced the German Army to a gasping exhaustion. You could have safely depended upon their paying no heed to rumours that would, if true, oblige them to weaken their own forces and thus imperil the chance of winning the dazzling triumph that they felt convinced would soon crown their strategy in the West.

A surprise may therefore be due to the refusal to accept unpalatable warnings—that is, warnings which do not fit into the plans of Headquarters. The classic examples of that are Joffre's conduct at the beginning of the War and subsequently at Verdun; Kitchener's, Robertson's, and Joffre's indifference to the reports of Austro-German and Bulgarian attacks in Serbia in 1915; the assumption by Haig that the Germans were so shattered by Passchendaele that they could not spare a division for the Italian Front; and the refusal of Pétain and Haig in 1918 to pay any attention to the many indications of an attack in front of Amiens. On none of these occasions did it suit these great Commanders to believe in warnings which were subsequently authenticated.

Let us examine two or three of these illustrations of my thesis.

(a) *The German Advance through Belgium in August, 1914.*

Perhaps the most surprising feature of this was the fact that it took the French by surprise at all. But Joffre was taken unawares by the wide northern sweep of

encirclement through Belgium which the Germans carried out, and by the number of troops which they concentrated upon the Western Front for the opening move of the War. *Joffre's miscalculation in August, 1914* The result was that they were able to make their advance almost unchallenged, save by the archaic fortifications of Liège and Namur, which their heavy field artillery—another unexpected blow for the Allies—soon reduced. The army under Von Kluck swept through Belgium along a line further north than Joffre had anticipated, and was scarcely checked at all, overwhelming the resistance of the small British force. It swung down to Paris, and very nearly brought to success the German purpose of capturing Paris, Sedanising the French Army, and knocking France out of the War.

Thus to the striking advance of the Germans several factors of surprise contributed :—

(1) The German forces mobilised and brought to the Western Front in the first few days of the War were far stronger than Joffre had calculated.

(2) The advance of Von Kluck's Army through Central Belgium to the north of Lanrezac was unexpected.

(3) The Germans used for field warfare guns of a far larger calibre than either the French or the British anticipated or possessed themselves. And yet French Headquarters had been for years in possession of the German plan and had every indication that it was to be carried out. They knew all about the German heavy artillery. The surprise was its mobility.

(b) *The Battle of the Marne.*

The First Battle of the Marne—second to none in

the War for its decisive importance in the course of the world conflict—was in the main a battle of manœuvre and strategy of mobile armies, depending for its issue on the element of surprise. Who was responsible for the Battle of the Marne? When the victor of the Marne is called up for judgment and recompense, there will be the same multitudinous response as Byron predicted when it is the turn of Junius to be summoned to the Bar :—

*Surprise  
elements in  
Marne battle*

“ The moment that you had pronounced him one,  
Presto ! his face changed, and he was another ;  
And when that change was hardly well put on,  
It varied, till I don't think his own mother  
(If that he had a mother) would her son  
Have known, he shifted so from one to t'other.”

But whoever he was or they were, commentators seem agreed on the factors which determined the issue at the Marne :—

(1) The swing-in of the 6th French Army under Manoury and of Gallieni's Paris Defence Force, against Von Kluck's right flank. Von Kluck was not expecting this attack and was not prepared for it until it was too late.

(2) The weakening of the German forces by the dispatch of two army corps to East Prussia, to counter the unexpected attack by Samsonoff's army—another surprise—and the leaving of two more army corps in Belgium to mask Antwerp and guard against an alleged Russian Army that was said to be coming to the West through England.

(3) The reappearance of the British Army in full force and vigour. This army was supposed to have been finally dispersed and disposed of.

(c) *The Dardanelles.*

This might have been an unexpected coup. Had we landed troops simultaneously with the naval bombardment, we know now that the Turks would have been taken completely by surprise, and that we could have occupied the Gallipoli Peninsula with hardly any loss. But we made a pyrotechnic and tympanic effort to warn and wake up the enemy and gave him plenty of time to make ready. The result was that we failed to gain Gallipoli.

*Surprise  
thrown away  
at Gallipoli*

(d) *Brussiloff's Offensive.*

The offensive carried out by Brussiloff against the Austrians at the beginning of June, 1916, was the most successful battle fought by the Russians throughout the War. It came a month before it was expected. Brussiloff began preparations at over twenty places at once, so that even deserters should not give away the real front of attack. And instead of concentrating his reserves "obviously," he distributed them widely. The absence of any obvious concentration was the real secret of his astonishing success. The Austrians were unprepared at that time to meet the impact. Between June and August, the Russians captured more than 350,000 prisoners, nearly 400 guns, 1,300 machine-guns and a tract of ground 200 miles long and in parts nearly 60 miles deep. Had the Russians had the mechanical means to exploit their victory this unforeseen move might have decided the War.

*Brussiloff  
attacks a  
month early*

(e) *The Mackensen attack at Gorlice, which rolled up*

the Russian Armies in 1915, and *the overthrow of Serbia* in the same year, provide illustrations of the surprises which were due to the refusal of Generals to take heed of intelligence inconsistent with their cherished plans. The Russians had information which ought to have warned them that there was a formidable offensive contemplated by the Germans in the direction of Gorlice. But the Russian High Command had other ideas and other plans, and the information which came to them as to the probable Mackensen offensive was therefore disregarded. Hence although forewarned, the attack had the effect of surprise. The same observation applies to the attack on Serbia.

(f) *The combined Austro-German-Bulgarian invasion of Serbia* in October, 1915, was a strategical surprise in the sense at least that the Allies allowed themselves to be taken unawares and unprepared. It ought to have been foreseen. Ample warning had been given of the Austro-German plans and of the fact that Bulgaria meant to throw in her lot with them. But the attention of the Western Generals was so focussed on their own great blow in France that they turned their faces away from that impending danger in the East. When it came it had therefore to them all the effect of a surprise.

(g) To a certain extent the *Battle of Verdun* presents another example of this type of surprise. The initial stage of the attack on the Verdun forts was not expected by the French Headquarters, not because they had not been forewarned of German preparations but because it did not suit their plans to believe them. The attack was therefore a great success. When it



was pressed on from week to week it ceased to be a surprise and achieved nothing for the assailants.

(h) *The Battle of the Somme.*

The main Battle of the Somme was a perfect illustration of a prolonged effort to inform the enemy beforehand and in time of our intentions—the roads crowded for weeks with columns of marching troops and with heavy guns drawn by caterpillars and huge lorries; the sky throbbing with observing aeroplanes; large numbers of captive balloons floating in the air along the exact line of attack. It was all like an old Chancery suit, where the most detailed pleadings informed the defendant to the minutest particular of every point that would have to be met and fought out. It conduced to protracted and costly litigation which deferred final decision until both sides were utterly ruined. Our great Generals would have made excellent special pleaders in the days of *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*. This kind of procedure suited the man in possession. In this case the man in possession of the disputed ground was the German. These elaborate preliminary warnings therefore suited him.

The British attack was supported with colossal artillery preparation—the heaviest that had ever been launched—and it was carried out by the finest flower of our volunteer army. But it was in no way a surprise attack. The enemy were well posted as to how, when, and where the attack was coming. Forewarned, they were forearmed. The result was that such gains as we achieved at the price of ghastly casualty lists during the opening days of the conflict were quite insignificant.

But there was one surprise feature about the

opening round of the Somme battle. The French attacked to the south of the British Front with five divisions. The Germans were expecting the British, but not the French attack, and in consequence the French advanced with lightning speed, pushed the line forward five miles on the first day, and within five days could report 9,000 prisoners and 60 guns captured for less than 8,000 total French casualties.

*French  
offensive the  
surprise  
feature*

(i) *The defeat of Roumania.*

The swift destruction of Roumania in September-October, 1916, must count as one of the most successful campaigns of the War. Among the chief determining factors in the German victory were these :—

*Unexpected  
elements in  
German attack  
on Roumania*

(1) It was believed that the Carpathian passes at that date were inaccessible to artillery and transport. They were not.

(2) The prompt declaration of war on Roumania by Bulgaria, followed by Mackensen's brilliant advance through the Dobrudja, these were unexpected developments. It had been thought that Bulgaria would delay or avoid open hostilities with Roumania, and that the Bulgaro-German forces would be too much occupied by the Salonika force to intervene.

(3) The Allies were assured that the Germans were so shattered and strained by the tremendous assaults on the Somme that they could not spare a battalion for Roumania. It was indeed a surprise to find that several German divisions were withdrawn from the Western Front at the height of the Battle of the Somme to furnish

Falkenhayn with an army to invade Roumania across the Carpathians.

These events prove that trench warfare and aerial observation do not preclude the element of surprise. The question that ought to have been considered by the Allied Military Staffs was whether there existed anywhere at any point of the compass the possibility of bringing off such crashing surprises as those engineered by the Germans? Clearly the enemy were expecting a resumption of the offensive on the Western Front in 1917, for they were making the most elaborate preparations to meet and defeat it. That accounted for the abandonment of the Somme Plateau in March and the retirement to a new and shorter line of defence, which had been carefully prepared. The withdrawal of the line was as a matter of fact a most effective surprise to the Allies. It threw our plans out of gear, and the Germans were enabled to save whole divisions from the trenches and thus accumulate masses of men behind the lines to fill up gaps and build up a reserve for counter-attack. It is inconceivable that these enormous operations should have been made without the knowledge of the French and British Intelligence Departments. Aeroplanes crossed and recrossed over and far beyond the German lines, and if they did observe and report the arrangements, which were in process for weeks running into months, to construct a new and massive line of entrenchments, the Staff do not seem to have attached any importance to the information. There does not seem to have been any aerial observation of the withdrawal of men, guns, munitions and stores that went on for days. The

*Surprise  
withdrawal  
of Germany  
on the Somme*

Intelligence Staffs who worked out plans for set offensives in the Allied Headquarters had been taught to believe that no surprises on a great scale were possible on either side in the stabilised West. They had never been able to stage one that misled the Germans. Why then should the Germans be able to deceive them? This was one of the axioms of Allied strategy fermenting under a brass hat. To doubt it, if you were a civilian, was to be an amateur ; if a soldier, then a crank only safe to fight in trenches, where to think was a breach of discipline. Surprise was therefore ruled out on the Western Front.

Why not attempt a surprise on the Italian Front? We were assured that nothing of that nature was possible there. The Austrians knew an offensive was coming. They probably did, but they were

*Surprise  
possible on  
Italian Front*

expecting the same old kind of offensive : a preliminary bombardment in a difficult country of granite trenches by an utterly inadequate artillery, insufficiently supplied with ammunition. Our Staffs knew that nothing could come of such an attack, except the loss by the enemy of a few kilometres which could be easily recovered by a well-timed and well-gunned counter-attack. Such a conventional offensive had its uses in the general scheme of things as ordered at Chantilly : it kept a number of Austrian guns in the Trentino or on the Isonzo so that they should not wander to the Carpathians, or so that the Austrians should not be able to lend their giant guns to the Germans in France. It never occurred to the rigid minds of the two G.H.Q.'s that a kind of attack was possible on the Italian Front which would have taken the Austrians completely unawares and achieved a real breakthrough and not impossibly a break-up, before the

Germans could come in sufficient numbers to the succour of their routed allies. It is fair to point out here that Pétain, Franchet d'Esperey and Micheler suggested a combined offensive in Italy on these lines in March, as an alternative to the attack on the Chemin des Dames. Had this advice been pressed to the point of acceptance and action, Caporetto might have been anticipated and reversed. The Italians had a definite numerical superiority over the Austrians. Had they been equipped with a corresponding superiority in heavy guns and ammunition, the Austrians might have been overwhelmed. They certainly would have been taken completely by surprise. Their soldiers had no experience on any front of that kind of bombardment and it would have completely unnerved them for some time. It

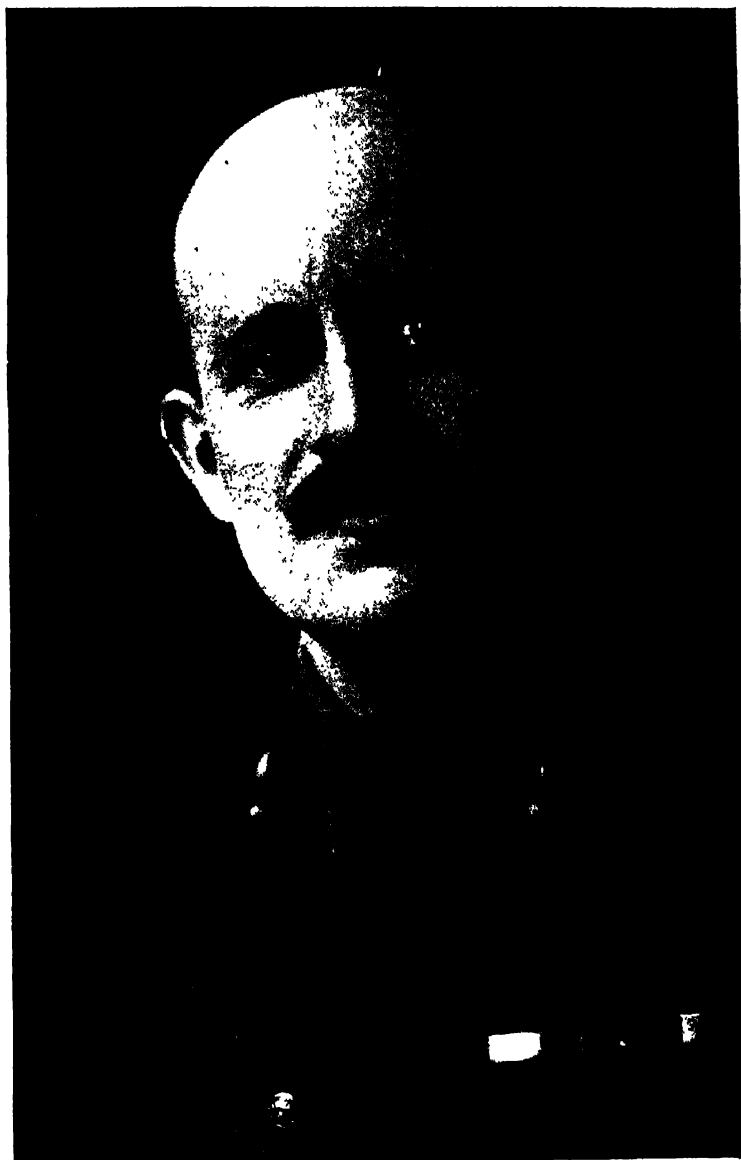
*My reasons  
for urging  
the plan*

would have taken weeks to steady and rally them. If the Italian advance, measured by kilometres, had been comparable to that of the Austrians in their unexpected attack in May, 1916, or to the German break-through at Amiens in March, 1918, or in June, 1918, at Château Thierry, the Istrian Peninsula would have been captured and Pola with its troublesome submarine base would have been cut off. Had it been as great a success as Caporetto was for the Central Powers, the Italians would have reached Laibach and penetrated beyond to the coal basin of Carniola. Why could it not have been done? The Austrians were not better men than the British who fought in front of Amiens, or the French who were driven back to the Marne in 1918.

These were the considerations that led me, on becoming Prime Minister, to make a fresh effort to dissuade the French Government from the

contemplated offensive in France and to induce them to join the Italians in launching a great combined attack on the Austrians. If the proposal met with approval at the Rome Conference, then a simultaneous attack on the eastern frontier of Austria could be arranged at the Petrograd Conference. I felt assured that the French and British Military Staffs would be obdurate. Better death (for other soldiers) on the Western Front than victory (for other Generals) on any other flank. The only hope was in the conversion of the French and Italian Governments to the scheme and in an insistence by the three Governments on its adoption by the High Commands. I knew that the Generals would regard the notion as another piece of amateur impertinence. Nevertheless, as I have already indicated, three great French Generals were converted in March to this strategic idea emanating from amateur brains.

*French  
Generals later  
on support it*



Lt.-Colonel Sir Maurice Hankey, G.C.B.





## CHAPTER XLVII

### THE ROME CONFERENCE

WHEN the Anglo-French Conference met in London on 26th December, 1916, to discuss the terms of the Allied reply to the German and Wilson Peace Notes, I proposed to it that representatives of the Governments and of the High Military Commands of Britain, France and Italy should meet together in conference at an early date, in order to have a frank discussion on the whole military and political situation.

There were immediate decisions of great urgency to be taken as to the Balkans, and to suit the convenience of General Sarrail, the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces at Salonika, General Milne, the British Commander, and also the Generals in command of the Serbian and Venezelist forces, whose presence at the discussion of the Greek position was desired, it was ultimately arranged that the conference should be held in Rome.

The Rome Conference met on 5th, 6th and 7th January, 1917. I took with me Lord Milner, Sir William Robertson and Sir Maurice Hankey. The French Premier, M. Briand, was accompanied by MM. Albert Thomas and Berthelot, and General Lyautey, the new French War Minister. The principal Italian Ministers were present in full force

*Allied  
representatives  
present*

with the Commander-in-Chief, General Cadorna General Sarraill and General Milne, who commanded our Army in the Balkans, crossed over from Salonika. Sir Francis Elliott and Colonel Fairholme, the Military Attaché, came from Athens.

In order to define the aims, and, in so far as I could, direct the discussions of the Conference, I had prepared the following memorandum which  
*Text of my memorandum* I circulated to the delegates. It was designed definitely to raise the important issues as to Allied strategy which I have set forth in the preceding chapter, and if possible to obtain decisions which would release us from the fatal net in which we were enmeshed by the Chantilly plans.

“ 1. The Conference was summoned at the desire of the British Government, as we felt that, in the present situation, a very frank discussion was necessary, not only with reference to recent events in the Balkans and in Greece, but also in regard to the whole campaign of 1917.

2. We wish first to ask the permission of the Conference to speak with great frankness, and we invite the representatives of France and Italy to adopt the same course. In the last two and a half years the British and French representatives, owing to the comparative nearness of London and Paris, have been able to meet on very frequent occasions. The result is that we have all got to know one another personally ; by degrees formality has been overcome ; and at our most recent Conferences we have been able to speak our full minds to one another without reserve, and without causing any friction or misunderstanding. Considerations of distance have unfortunately prevented

us from having such frequent meetings with the Italian representatives, but, in view of the traditional friendship between the British and Italian nations, and the racial affinity between the French and the Italians, we feel that we three nations, sitting together in council at this time of tremendous crisis, should speak to one another with the utmost freedom, and endeavour to secure the closest possible understanding. By such an understanding alone can we hope to secure that cordial co-operation which we believe to be essential to the winning of the War.

3. There is, indeed, nothing which the British Government have closer at heart than the concerting of such arrangements for co-operation between the Allies as will enable them to counteract the tremendous advantages which the enemy has obtained from a centralised control.

4. The material and moral resources of the Allies are greatly in excess of those of the enemy. The Allies have Entente Powers have more men, more guns, greater resources, and the whole world to draw upon; and yet they have not, up to the present, been able to overcome their common enemy. What is the reason for this? It is that the German Emperor has secured complete control over the resources of all the Central Powers, and is able to use them wherever they can be most effectively employed, having regard to all the circumstances.

5. During the year 1916, each of the Armies of the Entente Powers has conducted a campaign with the utmost skill and courage. We have nothing but admiration for the manner in which each of

the Armies has fought. We believe, though, that each nation has concentrated its efforts too much upon its own front, with the result that the advantages which the Allies possess in personnel and resources have not been utilised to their maximum efficiency. The efforts of the British and French Armies on the Western Front ; of the Italian Army on the Southern Front ; and of the Russians in the East, though latterly co-ordinated in point of time, have not been sufficient to prevent an inferior enemy from overrunning first Serbia and latterly Roumania. This is a serious reflection on our common efforts, and it behoves each Government to do its utmost to rectify the fundamental error.

6. *This, then, is the primary reason for which we have asked this Conference to assemble, namely, to examine whether some method can be found for focussing the efforts of the Allies in such a manner that, during the year 1917, the enemy can be crushed, and finally defeated.* In fact, we ask that the Conference shall now give expression and find some practical solution to the principle\* which was discussed at the Conference held in Paris on the 15th and 16th November last.

7. Assuming, then, that the principle of complete and united co-operation is accepted—and we feel sure that the Governments represented here to-day are bound to accept it—let us examine the present military situation and seek how this principle can best be applied.

8. Unquestionably, the gravest problems confronting the Allies arise from the collapse of Roumania. The Russians have had to extend their front in order that the Roumanian Armies

\* The principle of the common front and the pooling of Allied resources.

may reform in rear before again coming into the line in full force. This, we fear, may exercise a far-reaching effect on the power of Russia for the offensive during the year 1917. The lack of heavy guns and ammunition which, in 1916, prevented Russia from developing her full strength, and which we had hoped to overcome by the additions to be made to the Russian armament during the next few months may, we fear, again hamper the offensive of our great Eastern Ally, since the additional heavy guns will, for defensive purposes, have to be spread over the greatly increased length of front.

9. The Central Powers, we apprehend, may seek, if they think fit, to pursue their offensive far into the heart of Russia, either in the direction of Odessa or in the direction of Petrograd.

10. Or, alternatively, the Central Powers may prefer, when they have established themselves on the shortest possible defensive line in the East, to transfer a portion of their forces to attack the Allies at Salonika, and to overwhelm us in that theatre.

*The Balkan situation* . . . According to our military advisers, the Allies, at their present strength, should be able to maintain themselves against any attack which the enemy can bring against them in the Balkan theatre, but only by the evacuation of Monastir; the consequences of abandoning Monastir, however, are not agreeable to contemplate. It will open the way for direct communication between the Central Powers and Greece, and may lead to the intervention, on the side of the enemy, of yet another Balkan State, a weak one, it is true, but

not altogether negligible. Moreover, the evacuation of Monastir will have a most depressing effect on the morale of the Serbian Army, and it is to be feared that the troops composing this already dwindling force may become so discouraged as to desert the colours and scatter to their homes. In any case, the Serbian Army has always shown itself superior in offence to defence. Thus, by withdrawing to a shorter line, the Allies run the risk not only of a further serious weakening, but possibly of an actual diminution of their forces in the Balkan theatre. Withdrawal from Monastir, and the entry of the enemy into Greece, will inflict a moral blow on the cause of the Allies, which cannot fail to exercise a most unfortunate influence both on our own peoples and on neutral nations.

11. *There is yet another course which the Central Powers may adopt. They may turn the mass of their manœuvre army upon the Italian Front, either before or after they have dealt with the Russians,\* or alternatively, with the Army of the East. Are we to look on as anxious but impotent spectators whilst Germany destroys our friends one after another? This is our present position in reference to Roumania.*

12. Now what, I ask, are the plans of the Allies for meeting any of these contingencies? No doubt General Gourko, General Sarraill and General Cadorna has each an admirable plan of his own for meeting the contingency. *But what is the plan of the Allies as a whole? The combined offensive against Bulgaria, planned at Chantilly, is no longer practicable and so far as we know the Allies have absolutely no plan,*

\* This is exactly what happened later on at Caporetto.

*except for each General to continue 'punching' on his own front.* We do not say that this course is negligible. Unquestionably, operations such as those undertaken on the Somme, or on the Carso, have some considerable effect in drawing in a part of the enemy's manœuvre forces and in exhausting in rotation the troops that are put in to resist, but neither of these operations availed to save Roumania. *In modern war, it seems that the power of the defence, by first-rate and fully-equipped troops, is so considerable that great attacks can be held up by armies inferior numerically.* Unquestionably, also, the enemy has shown very great powers of resistance on the defensive, and extraordinary skill in making the utmost out of, and improving, artificially, such natural defences as are offered by the terrain.

13. We suggest that the Allied Generals should be asked by this Political Conference, to consider some more thorough measures of co-operation and that the Governments should be prepared to give them their support.

14. To give any direct assistance to Russia, except by means of such material equipment as can be passed in through Archangel and Vladivostock, is, we fear, impossible.\* *What can we do for Russia?* extent to which material assistance can, and ought to be given to Russia, having regard to the interests of the Allies as a whole, is the primary consideration to be examined at the forthcoming Conference in Russia. If the Russian Conference reports that, by increasing such equipment it is really possible in the year 1917 to put Russia in a position to exert an influence on the War commensurate with her numerical strength, then we

\* Every other gate had been closed by the enemy.

think that the Western Allies should themselves be prepared to make sacrifices to render this possible. We are, however, not yet certain that this is the case ; we have an open mind on the subject. We think it possible that technical difficulties of communications by sea and rail, lack of communications on the Russian Front, the character of bridges, inadequate facilities for training personnel, and the strategic disadvantages of a greatly extended front already alluded to, may possibly be so serious in their cumulative effect as to prevent a full use being put to the guns given to Russia. These, however, are matters primarily for the Russian Conference, and I will not detain the present Conference with them further.

15. With regard to the Balkans, the British and French Governments are in agreement, in principle, that :—

“ The Allies should continue to hold Monastir and the line at present occupied, as long as this can be done without exposing the forces to defeat.

Meanwhile a shorter line should be prepared for occupation, in case of need, which will enable the force to hold its own against any attack which may be made.”

*Allied  
disagreement  
about  
reinforcements  
for Salonika*      To meet the danger to the Salonika force, the French Government have decided to send two divisions, and have invited the British Government to examine the possibility of sending two divisions.

16. Practical considerations render it extremely difficult for us to comply with this request. The transport of troops from Great Britain to Salonika



involves a long sea journey, and locks up shipping for considerable periods. Moreover, every increase of the Army means an increase in the amount of shipping committed, for maintenance purposes, to this long and dangerous line of communications. The increased intensity of the enemy's submarine campaign makes this line of communication dangerous throughout its length. For these reasons we are most unwilling to send any further force to Salonika, at a time when our Allies are making ever-increasing demands on our shipping resources for their essential needs in raw materials, coal, food supplies, and munitions. So serious is the shipping position, so vital a factor is it upon the staying power of the Entente, that we will return to this question later as a separate subject. In the meanwhile, we must ask the Conference to accept our view that after exhaustive examination we have come to the conclusion that the grave shipping situation provides an overwhelming argument against the dispatch of further British divisions to Salonika. "

[The chapter on shipping reveals the precarious position we were in at that time. Our measures to deal with the situation had been barely launched. But it is necessary to point out that these difficulties with regard to the supply of shipping had not arisen in an acute form in 1915. Therefore we could then have dispatched to Salonika, and maintained there a sufficient force to prevent the Serbian defeat and the overrunning of the Balkan Peninsula by the Central Powers.]

The next six paragraphs of my memorandum, numbered 17 to 22, urged that Italy should send additional reinforcements to Salonika, and in this

connection advocated the development of a route from Santi Quaranta on the Adriatic, straight through to Monastir, and the improvement of railway communications down through Italy, so that supplies and reinforcements could be sent to Salonika overland, save for the short crossing of the Adriatic. Shipping would thus be economised, and the submarine menace to the Salonika communications immensely reduced.

“ 23. Leaving the Balkans, let us look at the Italian Front. Here there are two possible contingencies : one defensive, the other offensive. If the enemy should, as suggested above, concentrate his manœuvre armies against the Italian Front, it would afford a great opportunity for the Allies. Should the enemy adopt this course, the presumption is that he will gamble upon the stupidity and lack of mobility of the Allies. Unquestionably, he regards us as stupid and lacking in initiative. Let us take advantage of this amiable belief. The enemy will base the plan of attack on the assumption that he has to meet a force of so many Italian heavy guns, some of which he knows to be of old type, and lacking in mobility. If he elects to attack on this front, we propose that the Allies should concert their own plans, so that instead of meeting the artillery armament that he calculates for, he shall find himself confronted with a vastly superior armament of Italian guns reinforced by British, and, we should hope, French artillery, with their own personnel. We can put the Germans out of action just as well on the Italian as on the Western Front. By adopting this plan we might well convert a repulse into a rout, just as the Germans, by massing artillery

*Allied  
co-operation  
proposed on  
Italian Front*

on the Roumanian Front, converted the Roumanian invasion of Transylvania into an utter defeat. We ask our Allies to examine this proposal in a sympathetic spirit, and, subject to the approval of the Conference, *we propose that orders should be given to our respective General Staffs to work it out in all its technical details, including the elaboration of railway timetables, and the arrangements for the necessary gun emplacements and communications.\**

24. *The second possible contingency is that the Allies themselves should take the offensive in this region.* We

*Possibilities of an Italian offensive* consider that the instructions to the Allied Staffs should not be limited to the provision of a purely defensive

scheme for the Italian Front, as outlined above. We consider that they should be directed to examine also the possibilities of exploiting the offensive possibilities of this front. *We should like to ask the Generals to report to us whether they cannot devise plans for a surprise artillery concentration for offensive purposes on the Isonzo Front.* If our information is correct, the Italian Army has the strength to conduct offensive operations on a great scale on that relatively narrow front, which is suited to a great offensive, and they have also the *infantry* strength to hold a longer line than the present one. We understand that the reason why they have not yet achieved complete success in their splendid offensive is the lack of sufficient artillery, and more especially heavy artillery and heavy artillery ammunition, to bring about a decisive conclusion. Would it not be possible to make a great and sudden stroke against the enemy by a concentration of

\* This preparation for a German-Austrian attack on Italy saved the situation after Caporetto.

British and French artillery on the Isonzo Front, so as not only to ensure the safety of Italy against any enemy concentration, but, what is more important, to shatter the enemy's forces, to inflict a decisive defeat on him, and to press forward to Trieste and to get astride the Istrian Peninsula?

25. The strategical advantages to be gained by such action appear to be very great. It would probably be a great surprise to the enemy.

*Its strategical advantages* The action would be fought on enemy territory. It would enable the Italians to deploy their full strength. It would compel the enemy to defend a longer line. It should, therefore, have an immediate effect in relieving the Russian, Roumanian, and Balkan Fronts. It might enable the Allies to attack Pola, and probably either to destroy the Austrian Fleet, or to force it to action, or drive it out to become a prey to our submarines. This in turn should hamper the enemy's submarine campaign in the Mediterranean. Moreover, it could be accomplished without any additional strain whatever upon our shipping. It would have a moral and political effect of the greatest consequence, and would be a good counter to the enemy's successes in Roumania. It would enable the Allies to take advantage of a period when the weather on the Western Front is unfavourable for the development of a great offensive. It would, however, be absolutely necessary to have a clear understanding that, within a certain period of time, the heavy guns should be withdrawn to enable the British and French Armies to pursue their offensive on the Western Front.\*

\* When General Cadorna pointed out that this condition vitiated our offer of guns, it was unconditionally withdrawn by me at the Conference.

26. Such, then, are the problems which we think the Governments and the General Staffs should consider, namely :—

(1) The desirability of sending guns to Russia, even at a sacrifice, by the Western Powers.

*Summary of my suggestions* This however is a matter on which we must await the report of the Conference in Russia.

(2) The desirability of the dispatch of two Italian divisions to the Balkan theatre—either through Santi Quaranta or Salonika ; in this connection also the development of railway communications through Italy and Greece should be examined.

(3) The development of defensive and offensive schemes of co-operation on the Italian Front."

Copies of this document were distributed amongst the civilian, military and naval members of the various delegations before the Conference met. It will be noted that this paper forecast accurately the action subsequently taken by the Central Powers, the launching by them of a joint offensive against Italy as soon as they had disposed of Russia. My memorandum urged the Allies to take timely measures to counter the blow when it fell.

After a preliminary meeting, the Conference split up into two sections, Political and Military. The first pre-occupation of both sections was *Deadlock over Salonika policy* with the situation at Salonika. The military conference on this subject ended in a complete deadlock, for the French military delegates, supported by representatives of Russia,

insisted that Britain and Italy should furnish three more divisions for the Salonika Army, without any clear idea in their minds as to the purpose they were intended to serve. For defence they were superfluous ; for attack they would be insufficient. The British and Italians were emphatic that they could not do this, and that the few ships available should be utilised to fill up the undoubted weakness of the units already on the spot. If an overwhelming attack came from the North, of which they were doubtful, the forces there should be prepared to withdraw to a shorter line.

General Sarrail's acutest anxiety was about the safety of his left flank in the event of enemy attacks on his front. On 1st December, 1916, parties *Sarrail's fear of Greek attack* of Allied troops had been landed in Athens to enforce the fulfilment by the Greek King of Allied demands, and had been attacked by his troops. There was a real danger that any frontal attack by the enemy on the Salonika forces would be the signal for an outbreak of hostilities by the Greek Royalist troops in their rear, which would make their position one of acute jeopardy.

In view of this situation, General Sarrail came to me on the third morning of the conference for a personal interview.

He was one of those rare personalities of whom no one can form a moderate opinion. To his partisans he was a brilliant general, to his critics he was a bounding charlatan. *Sketch of Sarrail* Joffre said there was nothing he had done in the fight in France that would justify the view that he was an able general. Another distinguished Frenchman that I met said that Sarrail's fight against the Germans in the Nancy area was one of the finest feats

of the War. Of one thing I felt certain—the official military clique here and in France “had a down” on him. He was to them a political general, which simply meant that leading politicians believed in him. Better be “a friend of publicans and sinners” than of politicians. To French Headquarters he was therefore a more dangerous foe than Von Kluck. A general who is not in favour with Headquarters has a poorer chance than a politician who is not acceptable to the Party Whips. The obnoxious politician can appeal to the public and thus make himself such a menace that it is safer to conciliate than to crush him ; but for a soldier to appeal to any lay tribunal against either the strategy or the competency of his superiors is in itself an offence against professional canons which stamps him as an outsider.

Before I met Sarraïl in Rome I had taken my opinions concerning him from official sources, qualified by the eulogies passed upon him by M. Albert Thomas and M. Painlevé. I knew Thomas to be a shrewd judge of men as well as of affairs, and I was therefore quite prepared to find that Sarraïl was not the flashy adventurer who subordinated tactics to politics. But I was not quite prepared for the attractive and magnetic personality to whom I was introduced at the Rome Conference.

He was an exceptionally handsome man, with a high forehead, a glittering blue eye, a genial accost and a direct, intelligent and quiet manner of answering all the questions put to him about Salonika.

He demanded a free hand to anticipate the Greek move by an invasion of Greece and an attack on the Royal Army. To this I refused British assent. I was not prepared to allow action which might result in an outbreak of hostilities with the Greek population,

which was, on the whole, friendly to the Allies. The affair would, to the outside world, have an unpleasant resemblance to the conduct of the Germans in Belgium. But we were justified in adopting every measure necessary to protect our troops against the danger of sudden attack on their most vulnerable flanks. After the events of 1st December, therefore, we had imposed a severe blockade on Greece, which we were maintaining until we should be satisfied that the King had taken the necessary steps to clear up the position.

*I prohibit  
invasion of  
Greece*

I did my best to reassure General Sarraill, and obtained his promise that he would take no action without first communicating with me. It seemed fairly certain that the pressure of our blockade would compel the Greek Government to carry out our terms, even if rather slowly and unwillingly.

*Sarraill's  
promise*

I saw a good deal of Sarraill at this Conference. He made no complaint about his superiors, although he might have done so, for no General in the War was accorded meaner treatment. He was landed in an enterprise which could barely have succeeded when he took over the command if there had been abundant resources at his disposal. He was left without a competent Staff, and with a wretched equipment whether for fighting or for transport. His troops were far from being a good specimen of an average French Army. Even thus they were far below strength. He was expected to attack almost inaccessible defiles well entrenched, with a wretched quota of heavy guns and little ammunition. His British Allies were kept in the same condition of inadequacy and unpreparedness

*His difficult  
position*



for any effective contribution. I was surprised under these conditions that he seemed to preserve his geniality and good temper. But he certainly did. He was completely devoid of any bitterness and he never made a single complaint to me of the shabby treatment accorded to him and to his Army. It is on record that the favourable impression he made upon me was shared by all those who took part in the Rome Conference.

If he did not accomplish anything for two years, it was because it was not intended that he should, and the military junta who managed these things both in France and in England saw to it that every temptation to accomplishment should be withheld from this dashing but obnoxious general. The French General Staff, whilst pursuing a deliberate policy of starving the Salonika force, gave the impression to their Government that Sarraïl had been provided with the means which would enable him to carry through a decisive attack on the enemy positions in the Balkans. To do Robertson justice, he never sought to mislead his Government on that point.

But upon the question of further reinforcements for Salonika, no agreement was reached. At the conclusion of the second day's discussion,

*Briand's* M. Briand made an impassioned plea  
*great oration* for us to send two divisions thither.

As a piece of oratory it was the finest exhibition I have ever heard at any Conference. It was delivered in a comparatively small room, at a table around which barely a dozen sat. M. Briand spoke sitting. Voice, gesture, inflection, displayed his oratorical powers at their best, as if he were addressing a crowded Chamber of Deputies. He spoke with

dramatic force, and yet we never felt anything incongruous in the method of such a deliverance to so small and intimate a gathering. Rhetorically it was a triumph. As soon as he finished, Baron Sonnino turned round to me and said : " That is the finest speech I ever heard." But whilst it was a brilliant display of M. Briand's powers, it was also a revelation of his defects.

There was no attempt to deal with the practical difficulties or to indicate how they were to be overcome. There were two other characteristic touches to follow. We were to dine at the French Embassy that evening. The speech delayed us, and M. Barrère had to postpone the hour of our repast. When M. Briand finished, the tenseness of the face relaxed, the glow in the eye disappeared, and he turned round to us with a smile, and said : " And now for the Embassy ! " The following morning Albert Thomas sought to renew the discussion and bring it to some practical point, but his eloquent chief cut him short. He wanted no further debate on the topic. He had come there to deliver a speech and not to obtain a decision. His speech had been delivered ; it was a triumph : there was nothing more to be done.

However, I thought it necessary to give practical reasons why we could not comply with the French demand, and I said that " if eloquence  
*My reply* would carry two divisions to Salonika, M. Briand's speech at the conclusion of the previous evening's Conference would have accomplished the task. Unfortunately, however, ships were needed and these we had not got." I read a telegram received that morning from the Quartermaster-General of the War Office to the effect that since the previous Thursday the traffic

through the Mediterranean had been absolutely closed to our ships, owing to submarines, though it was hoped to resume traffic in a day or two. I had the warmest sympathy with M. Briand's desire to reinforce our Army in the Balkans, particularly if any prospect should be opened of our using it for an effective thrust against the enemy in that region.

*Shipping shortage prevents reinforcement of Salonika* But our shipping had now been very seriously reduced by submarine attacks, and was in greater demand than ever for carrying supplies, not only for ourselves but for our Allies. We had at the time no less than 1,200,000 tons of shipping occupied with carrying for the French, and several hundred thousand tons carrying for the Italians. Unless they were prepared to forego the supplies of coal, steel and other commodities which we were shipping for them, we simply could not add to our commitments the task of transporting further forces to Salonika and maintaining them there—certainly not until the submarine crisis had been overcome. We already had more men on that front than either the French or the Italians, and to keep them reinforced with fresh drafts, and provisioned with food, equipment and munitions at the other end of the submarine-infested Mediterranean, was a task of no little difficulty.

Besides, the Salonika Front was still unadapted for large-scale offensive operations. Little had been done to improve the transport facilities up country from the ports. The roads were deplorably bad. I urged the Italians, therefore, at the Conference, to supply companies of engineers and workmen for making an additional road from Santi Quaranta to Monastir and improving the railway lines, so that there might be a

*Balkan transport neglected*

line of communication with the Balkans which would run mainly overland, with only a short and easily protected sea trip from Brindisi to Santi Quaranta. But General Cadorna flatly refused to supply engineers, and would give no pledge even to find labourers for the work.

And now we come to the discussions and conclusions on the subject which was to me the main purpose of the Conference—the effort to secure a fundamental reconstruction of Allied strategy on all fronts. I had summarised my views in the memorandum distributed

*Attempt to  
co-ordinate  
Inter-Allied  
strategy*

before the meeting and I invited a discussion on my proposals. In opening this discussion I drew particular attention to two questions raised in that memorandum. The first of these was the re-equipment of the Russian Armies, and the second, the question of a combined attack on the Italian Front. Referring to the second of these subjects, I said that the Italian Front appeared to offer an admirable opportunity for breaking fresh ground. The Italian Army, though its equipment had proceeded at a wonderful rate, had not yet reached the stage,

*I urge  
possibilities of  
the Italian  
Front*

particularly in the matter of heavy guns, when it could bring an overwhelming artillery fire to bear on the enemy.

But on the Italian Front the Allies had to deal with an enemy who was weaker than elsewhere on the Western Front, where the Allies were opposed by Germans. The Austrians had not the same cohesion as the Germans, and were less redoubtable as a fighting unit. I suggested also that on this front the Central Powers were more vulnerable than on other fronts. If you were to drive the Germans back 20 or 30 miles on our front, you

would find them still pivoting on French villages, which would have to be destroyed one by one to ensure a continuance of the advance. On the Italian Front, however, you could reach the enemy's vitals. Here the advance would be in enemy territory, and it would be the enemy's villages that would be destroyed. I laid great stress on the fact that the Austrians were the weakest enemy, and I suggested we ought to strike at the weakest and not at the strongest point in the enemy front. Germany, I pointed out, was formidable so long as she could command an unbroken Austria, but if Austria were beaten Germany would be beaten too. For these reasons I strongly advocated that the question of crushing Austria should be examined. I further pointed out that an incidental advantage would be that an attack on the Italian Front would undoubtedly divert the enemy's attention from the Balkans. If attacked on the Italian Front the Austrians could not carry out an invasion of the Balkans. Possibly, also, action here might have the effect of stopping the Moldavian attack.

I pointed out that the operations on the Somme did not have the effect of withdrawing troops from the East to the West. On the West the enemy  
*Cost of territorial gains in France* sold dearly the land they held. They said that if you wanted to take, for example, Courcelles, you must pay 10,000 lives for it; Pozières was more important, and for that the enemy demanded 40,000 lives; Comblès was more important still, and for this the price paid was perhaps 60,000 lives. Though they ceded these points at a price, the enemy never gave up anything vital on the Western Front.

Shipping was one of our difficulties, but this

question did not arise in the matter of assistance to be rendered by the Allies for an Italian offensive. We could supply a certain number of trucks for the transport of guns to the Italian Front, and the operation which I proposed on that front was one which could be carried out without any demand upon shipping.

I therefore strongly urged that my proposal should be examined by the General Staffs. *I pointed out however, that this was not enough, and that it would never be carried out unless Ministers themselves took the matter in hand, and insisted on its being considered favourably.* It was contrary to human nature for General Sir Douglas Haig to say that General Cadorna's front was more important than his own ; and conversely, you could not expect General Cadorna to say that the British Front was more important than the Italian.

I then read the following resolution :—

“ The Conference are impressed with the advantages afforded by the Italian Front for a combined offensive by the three Western Allies, which are as follows :—

*My proposed  
resolution for  
an Italian  
offensive*

1. It would relieve the pressure on Russia, Roumania and the Balkans.

2. It would attack the enemy on a front where his forces are weaker in numbers, quality, and equipment, than at any other point accessible to the Allied Armies of the West.

3. It might enable the Allies to capture Trieste, which would bring important political advantages.

4. It might enable the Allies to capture Pola, the principal Austrian naval base, thereby reducing the submarine menace in the Mediterranean.

5. No additional demand on shipping transport is involved.

6. The Allies would be fighting on enemy territory.

The Conference refer this question for immediate examination by the Ministers, in conjunction with the military representatives, more particularly from the point of view of the form which the French and British co-operation should take."

I explained that the last sentence referred to the question whether General Cadorna would require guns only or infantry divisions as well.

According to a note taken at the time, M. Briand pointed out

"how great was the organisation needed, under modern conditions, for an offensive. It was, he said, nothing less than a great industrial *Briand prefers* organisation. *He further pointed out that Nivelle plan* the Staffs of the Allies had recently worked out their plans at Chantilly; and that the preparations for carrying them out were now far advanced. In view of this he questioned whether it would be wise to change the plan now. M. Briand said that General Nivelle reported that the German forces had, to a considerable extent, been used up, and that they were not nearly so thick on the ground as they used to be. Having regard to the ascendancy recently shown by French troops

*General Nivelle considered it possible to break through. M. Briand therefore urged that in the examination of this question its repercussion on the offensive, which had been so long prepared, should be carefully considered. He therefore expressed sympathy with the proposal, but reserved it for technical examination, and at present he would not attempt to anticipate the opinion of the military experts. He urged, however, the importance of the spring offensive being decisive."*

Continuing, M. Briand said that,

*"if we could really break through to Trieste, he would be quite in accord, and thought that we ought to undertake the operation. In view, however, of the importance of not unsettling the military plans which were now far advanced, he felt bound to make a reserve in welcoming the proposal."*

I replied that

*"I did not propose for one moment that my plan should be decided on without the fullest examination. I urged, however, that I refuse to treat military opinion as infallible the Government should not take as final a declaration by General Nivelle, or General Douglas Haig, that they could not spare the guns. Of course, the Generals would not allow the guns to go. I did not deny that the Generals were just as confident now as they had ever been, but I pointed out that they had always been just as confident before previous offensives. The Central Powers, however, did not confine their efforts to one front as each of the Allied Generals did.*



They attacked in Roumania, or the Balkans, or wherever they could hit hardest at the moment. *They might very likely strike before long at the Italian Front if they thought they could do any good there."*

Baron Sonnino said that

"the Italian Government felt it was quite possible that the enemy might come to that front in a month or two."

M. Briand again reverted to the very heavy preparations involved in an attack, under modern conditions.

*Briand's  
eulogy  
of Nivelle*

"There were so many miles of front, so many troops, and so many guns required; all had to be calculated to a nicety, and all kinds of preparations made. He said that, when General Nivelle had commanded the armies in the region of Verdun, he had come to M. Briand and proposed an attack. M. Briand had felt some doubt about the question, owing to the *usure*. General Nivelle, however, had described exactly how he could conduct the operation, and had stated that he would send telegrams to him at such and such an hour from such and such points, which he had captured. Eventually, M. Briand sanctioned the attack, and General Nivelle carried it out absolutely as he had forecast. This naturally had created a most favourable impression in regard to General Nivelle on M. Briand's mind, and made him feel some confidence in his plans for the future. At Verdun, M. Briand pointed out, the French actually did break right through the German lines,

but the country was a *cul de sac* and unfavourable to an advance. Nevertheless, they gained invaluable experience. *They were inclined to think that an attack, prepared in a certain way, had now a very good chance of succeeding."*

M. Thomas, while not rejecting my proposal, urged

"that it must be examined to the bottom (*au fond*) particularly in regard to the question of dates and the equilibrium of force on the different fronts."

M. Briand again pressed the contention as to the deterioration in the quality of the German Army. He said

*"there was considerable difference between the character of the enemy's troops now and in the early part of the War.*

*Formerly, all the enemy troops consisted of troupes de choc but now only a portion of the enemy's forces could be regarded as troupes de choc. Hence, in most parts of the line we should find rather mediocre troops opposed to us. That is how he envisaged the strategical situation of the enemy. He did not dismiss my proposal but only urged that it required careful examination."*

The Russian Ambassador pointed out that it was very important to secure concerted plans. He considered my proposal a very seductive one.

Baron Sonnino said that there were two ways of presenting the problem for examination :—

1. On the basis that the Italian forces required material support only ; and
2. On the basis that they required troops in addition.

M. Briand said he would be very surprised if General Cadorna had not already had some proposition in view.

I asked that General Cadorna should consider the proposition that evening, and give his views to-morrow.

Baron Sonnino suggested, however, that it would be better for General Cadorna to hear my views at once, and urged that he should be summoned to join the Conference.

*Cadorna  
summoned to  
the Conference*

At this point General Cadorna entered the Conference and Baron Sonnino explained my proposal to him. General Cadorna said that he had had an opportunity of glancing at my memorandum. As a point of detail he said he did not like the idea of advancing on Pola. To do so would take him away from his main objective, which was Laibach, on the road to Vienna.

I interpolated at this point that I would be quite satisfied if General Cadorna could advance towards Vienna with the reinforcements proposed.

General Cadorna went on to ask

“ how long the material would be at his disposal ? This was really an essential point. *He gathered from*

*Temporary  
loan of guns  
useless to  
Cadorna*

*conversations with Generals Lyautey and Robertson that the material would have to be returned by May.* He reminded the Conference that to be useful for offensive operations the material must be back some eight or ten days before the offensive began. Then an allowance had to be made for the time necessary for the transport to and from France. Time also had to be allowed for loading and unloading off the railways. Then there were the different methods of the various nations to be considered in regard

to technical matters, such as fire control, the use of metres instead of yards, fire observations, etc. ; some time would be required to accustom the British and French artillery to the Italian methods. After you had made allowance for all these things, he asked how much time remained ? If he could have the artillery for long enough he would, of course, be delighted."

General Cadorna then alluded to the danger of an offensive from the Trentino, which, he pointed out,

" was very great. So long as the snow was on the mountains the Italians were safe from this menace, but after May he was liable to be attacked from two points."

*I said that*

*" the conditions as to the return of the guns by May might apply to the French guns, but I My offer to lend guns for a prolonged offensive myself had not, up to the present, excluded the possibility of allowing British guns to remain for a longer time on the Italian Front."*

M. Thomas expressed

" considerable surprise at this last remark. He said that I talked as though my resources were unlimited. At one and the same time I talked of sending guns both to Russia and to Italy. *How could this be done without altering the whole equilibrium of the position on the Western Front ?* "

I retorted that,

" at the present moment, there were on the British Front twice as many heavy guns as there

were at the commencement of the Battle of the Somme. We had given no undertaking that we could allot any specified number of guns to the French Front. At this moment we had three times as much ammunition as we had at the beginning of the Somme offensive. Moreover, if we lent 250 to 300 heavy guns to Italy to-day, by the end of February we should, at our present rate of output, have replaced the whole amount. M. Thomas, no doubt, could speak for the French position, but I knew as much as anyone about the British position in regard to heavy guns."

General Cadorna said that

"he would be only too delighted to have a larger force at his disposal. He would gladly accept heavy guns, but if they were only to be available for some three months from the present time, it was not worth while for him to accept them."

I was disgusted with the lack of enthusiasm displayed by Cadorna over the proposal made by one of the most powerful of the Allies to equip him for a sustained attack on the Austrians by supplying him with his deficiencies in heavy guns, and I turned to Sir Maurice Hankey and said: "The old fellow does not want guns." This provoked a protest from Sonnino, who was utterly bewildered by Cadorna's reluctance to close with our offer.

I replied that,

"of course, General Cadorna would like to have the guns. Every General would like to have

more heavy guns. This, however, had not been the motive of my proposal. The question for General Cadorna to consider, and on which the Conference desired his opinion, was, if he were lent the guns, could he carry out a really great, or even decisive, operation on behalf of the Allies ? ”

General Cadorna replied that

“ he could undoubtedly carry out a very great operation with further assistance in heavy guns, but the operation would necessarily be  
*Cadorna* a very long one. Referring to my  
*hesitant and* memorandum, *he pointed out that a*  
*non-committal* *tactical surprise, under modern conditions,*  
*was not practicable.* The enemy would unquestionably discover that the guns were being brought to that front.”

I said that,

“ nevertheless, it would be a certain surprise to the enemy to see the Allies co-operating closely in this way. I did not intend that the attack would be a surprise in the tactical sense, but that our initiative would necessarily dislocate the enemy's plans. I asked what precisely General Cadorna thought that he could accomplish with the guns. I did not ask for an immediate answer, but I wanted to know what he considered he could do.”

General Cadorna stated that undoubtedly he could do a good deal more on a wider front, and he undertook to consider the question. He then withdrew from the Conference.

*Lord Milner pointed out,*

“on the question of surprise, that we were always told that we could not surprise the enemy, yet the enemy *Germany's success in surprising the Allies* always surprised us. In support of this he instanced Verdun and the attack on Roumania, both of which were surprises. The fact was that the initiative always rested with the enemy. General Cadorna had intimated that he could do something if given these guns, but the question we wanted to know was—could he undertake a really great and successful operation? It would not be worth while displacing the guns merely to gain five miles of territory instead of three. But it would be worth while to break right through. In any case, our strategic initiative on this front would be bound to disturb the enemy's plans, even if a tactical surprise were not possible.”

The conclusions finally reached by the Rome Conference were set out in the following eight propositions :—

1. The Conference agrees in principle that in future there should be closer co-operation between the Allies than in the past. They further agree that in future more frequent conferences are necessary. *Conclusions of the Conference*
2. The Conference regard as essential to the success of the Allied cause that the Western Powers should take immediate steps to provide the Russian Armies with the necessary guns and ammunition to enable them to make full use of their great resources in men, and to break through the German lines on the Eastern Front. *Help for Russia*

In order to give practical effect to the above resolution, the Governments represented at the Conference further agree that their representatives at the forthcoming Conference in Russia should be granted full authority to take the necessary decisions, after telegraphic communication with their respective Governments in case of necessity.

3. The Conference approve in principle the development of a new line of communications with Macedonia with the object of diminishing the length of the communications by sea, which are at present seriously threatened by submarine attack, and reducing the dependence on sea transport. With this object in view the Italian Minister of Transport undertook to discuss, with British and French experts to be sent to Rome, the question of the development of transit of Allied troops and material over the Italian railways to the ports of Southern Italy. He indicated that the question depended mainly upon the amount of rolling-stock that could be placed at the disposal of the Italian Government. He suggested that this could best be achieved by diverting to the Italian railways French rolling-stock, which can be attached to the Italian engines more easily than British ; British rolling-stock will be sent to France to replace what is taken away, as far as possible. With the object of developing a new line of communications with Monastir from Santi Quaranta, the French Government undertook to supply two companies of field engineers, and the Italian Government undertook to do their best to supply civil engineers and about 2,000 labourers.

4. The Conference approved the immediate



presentation to the Greek Government, by the four Governments concerned, of the Declaration in the Appendix.

*Joint  
ultimatum  
to Greece*

5. The Conference agreed to the following principles to guide the action of General Sarrail with regard to Greece :—

(a) He should take no military action against Greece during the 48 hours covered by the Declaration ;

(b) If the Declaration should be refused, he should be at liberty to take such military action as he considered necessary for the security of the Allied Army of the East ;

(c) If the conditions laid down in the Allied Declaration are accepted and carried out by the Greek Government, he should take no military action against Greece without the consent of the Allied Governments ;

(d) If the Greek Government accept the conditions laid down in the Declaration, but do not carry them out within the fortnight laid down in the Declaration, he should obtain the approval of the British, French, Italian and Russian Governments before taking the initiative in any military action.

6. The Governments represented at the Conference agreed that in future the relations between the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Army of the East and the Generals commanding the Forces of the different nationalities should be based on the principles which governed the relations between the British Commander-in-Chief and the Commander of the French Forces in the Gallipoli

*Sarrail's  
authority  
defined*

Expedition, that is to say, the Commander of each of the Allied Forces shall comply with the orders of the Commander-in-Chief as regards military operations, subject to the right of direct communication with, and reference to, his own Government.

7. The Conference are impressed with the opportunities afforded by the Italian Front for a combined offensive by the three Western Allies. They agree that the question of assistance being given by the Western Allies to the Italian Army on the Carso should be referred to the Military Advisers of the various Governments, with a view to a decision by the three Governments concerned.

8. The Conference decided that a technical Naval and Shipping Conference should be held in London at the earliest possible date.

The Appendix, mentioned in the fourth resolution above, contained the French text of the ultimatum to Greece. This document stated that the Allies were determined to protect their armies against the menace created by the presence of the Greek forces in their rear. This could only be done if these forces were, as contemplated in our Note to Greece of 14th December (and in a second Note of 31st December) transported to the Peloponnesus as soon as possible. It was also necessary that the Allies should have full liberty to control the movement. If within 48 hours of the receipt of this declaration it was not agreed to by the Greek Government, the Allies would assume full liberty to safeguard their Armies by other means.

For their part, the Allies were prepared to respect the wish of the Greek Government to keep out of the War, and would not allow the Venizelist faction to invade or extend control over any of the territory still under the rule of the Royalist Government. We would also raise the blockade as soon as our demands had been satisfactorily carried out.

This ultimatum proved to be efficacious for its purpose.

I may anticipate the sequel to the Rome Conference as far as Salonika was concerned, to say that although the Greek Government showed an obvious desire to evade fulfilment of the terms of the Allied ultimatum, it found itself compelled to proceed with their observance. By the end of January, Brigadier-General Philipps was able to report to us that while the Greek troops would not all be south of the Isthmus by the appointed day, enough would have gone to render the remnant harmless against us ; and the position was by then so satisfactory that we were able to sanction a partial relaxation of the blockade.

The Rome Conference came to subsidiary decisions which had in the sequel important results. It temporarily cleared up the Greek situation. Both at Athens and Salonika it saved us from precipitate action which would have damaged the Allied cause. It initiated transport arrangements for the use of Italian railways to carry troops and material from France to Brindisi. These arrangements relieved the pressure on our shipping, and what is more important, they ultimately enabled French and British troops to rush to the aid of the broken army of Italy after Caporetto without loss of invaluable time.

Perhaps one of the most far-reaching decisions of

all was that which resolved to summon an Inter-  
*Gave birth to* Allied Naval and Shipping Conference  
*Inter-Allied* to consider the best methods of co-  
*Naval and* ordinating Allied resources at sea. It is  
*Shipping* incredible that no such conference had  
*Conference* ever been held before. In fact, the Allied War  
Directors never seemed to have realised that the  
transport question was at the root of most of their  
difficulties.

The Central Powers had an undoubted advantage over the Allies in the fact that they were operating on internal lines. We had the paramount advantage of the command of the sea. We ought to have realised both these facts with all their implications, and taken immediate steps to neutralise the enemy superiority due to their central position while profiting more by our own superiority on the sea.

But we were now entering on the fourth campaign of the War, and the Allies had decided for the first time to sit down to a thorough examination of one of the most vital problems with which they were confronted. In that respect the Rome discussions were of great practical value.

I was unable, however, to persuade the French to accept even in principle the idea of a combined spring  
*My plan for* offensive on the Italian Front, and  
*Italian* Cadorna's lukewarmness was fatal to my  
*offensive* insistence. In view of the attempt to  
*rejected* fasten the whole responsibility for the  
Nivelle offensive on to me, because of my strenuous  
effort to make it a success once it was determined  
upon, I have felt it necessary to quote in full the  
passages in which early in January I urged  
the concentration of our offensive gun power on the  
Italian Front as a substitute for the project of a great

spring offensive in France. It will be observed that I failed to persuade our Allies to take that course. The Chantilly plans had been agreed to by all the Allies at the Paris Conference in November. They were in the nature of a military Pact accepted by all the Governments concerned. The consent of all the signatories to the Paris Convention was necessary to secure any important change in its terms. France was implacable, Italy was indifferent. No strategical alteration was therefore possible without a serious conflict between the Allies. Ultimately the Conference agreed to the proposition which I have already quoted as No. 7 of its conclusions. This referred the whole question of a combined offensive on the Italian Front to those military experts who were already committed to the Nivelle plan.

This result was disappointing. When we came to the main purpose for which the Conference had been summoned—a real and not a sham co-ordination of strategy—the Conference reached no final decision and the military staffs were left in possession of the field. There were many reasons for that. The most important I shall examine in a separate chapter.

I shall here only allude to one of the chief obstructive elements—the bondage of professional etiquette. The professional *The professional bug* deems it a point of honour to stand by his brethren against all outsiders, including the facts. I have very little doubt that this is true of all the Military High Commands. I could see it operate in Rome. Cadorna, I know, favoured a combined offensive on the Italian Front, but he put up no fight for his idea, even when a British Prime Minister offered him an opening and an opportunity. Had

he conducted all his military operations in the same perfunctory spirit, he would never have captured a single mound on the Austrian frontier. The reason for his feebleness was that he had been persuaded at Chantilly to accept a different strategy. His better judgment had been overridden by men whose prestige was greater, but he had entered into a definite arrangement with them at the Military Conference, and he was very reluctant to do something which looked like breaking faith with his brother Commanders. He had been seen by Robertson and the French Generals before he entered the Conference, and they had insisted upon his adhering to the letter of his bond, even though it involved the throwing away of the most promising chance afforded to him to win a great triumph for his country. Professional susceptibilities blocked his way. That accounted for his hesitancy, his raising of objections and obstacles. To justify him in refusing the powerful aid offered by me to his army, Robertson and Lyautey had told him that the guns were a temporary loan and would have to be returned to the French Government in May. After my statement at the Conference withdrawing this condition, this could no longer be pleaded as an excuse for declining the offer. When I told Cadorna that the British guns at least would not be withdrawn, he ignored my statement. If Cadorna had started a successful offensive in March or April, no French or British General could or would have insisted on the withdrawal of a single gun.

What contributed much more to the failure of my effort to induce a reconsideration of Allied strategy was the fact that the French Ministers—M. Briand

and M. Albert Thomas—gave resolute support to their *French Government's remarkable change of attitude* military staffs. Their action was incalculable to those who knew their previous attitude. They both were and always had been zealous advocates of the "way round." They never believed in the policy of attrition. From January, 1915, onwards they had both advocated consistently an attack on the weaker enemy front. Why did they swing round so completely at the Rome Conference? I will endeavour to give some explanation of this *volte-face* in the ensuing chapter.

## CHAPTER XLVIII

### PSYCHOLOGY AND STRATEGY

REFLECTING on the proceedings of the Rome Conference I had an uneasy feeling that the strategy of the Allies was not dictated solely by considerations of military advantage to their cause as a whole. The arguments advanced appeared to me to have very little to do with the various proposals which came before us. The motives that prompted either support or opposition to any particular scheme, arose from incentives that were not revealed in the course of conversation between the Allied representatives. My experience of life has taught me that men and women are not moved so much by argument as by hidden motives which are never exposed in the interchange of words. Once the undisclosed impulses or prejudices are overcome the task of the persuader becomes simpler. The road has then been cleared for reason. The reluctance shown to help Cadorna with the guns necessary to enable him to stage a powerful offensive, was defended in the Conference room by considerations much too trivial to be genuine. What, then, was the real objection which stood in the way?

Luigi Villari in his fascinating book *Villari's view* "The War on the Italian Front," referring to my Rome plan for a combined offensive on the Italian Front, says :—



"The hostility of the British and French military representatives resulted in the abandonment of Lloyd George's scheme. It was not a question of personal or national jealousy on either side, but simply a divergence between two schools of military thought, Cadorna believing in the principle of concentration on the weakest enemy, his British and French colleagues on the strongest."\*

This sentiment displays an ingenuousness creditable to the writer's generosity but not to his knowledge of human nature.

It is a commonplace to call attention to the strange mixture of human motive which impels conduct in all manner of men. It is confused and contradictory, selfish and unselfish, generous and mean, noble and petty—sometimes it resolves itself into a struggle between equally exalted passions—all these elements in the same breast and fermenting in the same heart at the same time. The blend of all with one of the hues predominating is what determines character. In some natures the ingredients constitute a mere blotch or blur of character. It is a mistake to assume that the best are devoid of the worst and that the worst possess no trace of the best. Sometimes a motive which is out of keeping with the general character of a man or a woman gains the ascendancy over reason, baffling and disappointing his or her intimates.

In the Rome discussions, more particularly as to the project of an Italian offensive, were there no personal or national jealousies to deflect judgment? Are men in exalted positions—won by intellectual

\* The War on the Italian Front," p. 104.

gifts, high character, and real achievements—quite free from these disturbing elements? I will give an *National and personal illustration drawn from enemy sources.* The great Austrian Commander, Conrad von Hoetzendorff, was a strategist of considerable genius. I have heard and read competent military critics who rank him as the greatest strategist of the War. For the 1916 campaign he conceived a plan to eliminate Italy from the War by an attack from the Trentino. Italian resistance was to be crushed by an overwhelming gun power backed by an adequate force of infantry. It was a feasible operation. Italy was notoriously weak in artillery of the heavier calibres and her supply of ammunition was deficient. Her officers also at that date lacked the necessary training and experience in manœuvring large masses of troops. As long as the Italian Army held strong and fortified positions in the hills, light and medium artillery might enable them to hold their own in the absence of a surprise attack. Once they were driven into the plains with no time to entrench, their inferiority in guns and manœuvring skill would tell against them.

*Italian vulnerability in 1916* In the spring of 1916 France and Britain were still inferior to the Central Powers in heavy artillery, and therefore could not, whilst they were undertaking great offensives on their own front, supply the Italians with an equipment which would have enabled them to resist effectively a strong attack by a German-Austrian combination. Had the Germans assisted the project with a few divisions and a complement of heavy guns, the Austrians, in order to create a force of sufficient offensive strength to carry out the operation, need not have weakened their defences

in the Carpathians. Von Hoetzendorff placed the scheme before Falkenhayn, who turned it down emphatically. Why? He also had his plan. He proposed to eliminate France by pounding the morale of her fine army into pulp in the mortar of Verdun. Once the fighting quality of the French Army was destroyed there would be nothing left to take its place. Britain was not ready. Her volunteer army was not yet trained. Her equipment of guns and ammunition was not complete. We all know now how disastrously Falkenhayn miscalculated the resisting power of the French soldier. We also know that had the Austrians started their Trentino offensive in March or April instead of at the end of May, which they could have done had the Germans played up, the Russians could not have delivered the famous Brussiloff stroke.

Thus the additional weight which the Germans could have brought in guns, troops and quality would have converted the serious Italian defeat of 1916 into a calamitous rout. It would have been a more disastrous Caporetto. It was a more deadly stroke, for its direction was across the rear of the Italian Armies on the Isonzo. Its success must therefore have ended in a complete collapse of the whole Italian system of defence. In 1916 the Allies had made no arrangements such as those they perfected in 1917, as the result of the Rome Conference, to hurry troops to the aid of Italy in the event of a German-Austrian attack. That oversight would have made a difference of weeks—fateful weeks—in the arrival of needful help for the hard-pressed Italians. Even when British and French troops arrived on the scene, they would not then have had such a margin of heavy

guns to spare as would have enabled them to rally a broken and demoralised army on the open plains of Lombardy, against the terrible guns that pulverised the forts of Verdun. Italy would not have sued for peace, but her losses in men and material would have been tremendous. Her means of replenishing material losses, which were mainly situated in North Italy, would have largely fallen into the hands of the enemy, and Italian demoralisation would have been general and deep. Recovery would have taken at least a year. As an effective attacking force Italy would have been out of action for the rest of the War. It was a brilliant strategic conception. Why did Falkenhayn refuse to give it a trial?

An examination of the probable effect of success on national and personal values will assist us in finding the true answer to that question.

The complete failure of the plan was out of the question. Partial success was the least that could have happened. Had it realised moderate expectations, the greatest victory of the War would have been Conrad's and not Falkenhayn's. If the destruction of the Italian Army in 1916 had brought the final triumph of the armies of the Central Powers nearer and made it surer, Conrad would have been the Teutonic hero, and not Falkenhayn. On the other hand, had Falkenhayn's Verdun scheme destroyed the French Army, no name in German military history would have stood higher than his. Let us carry our examination of probabilities a step further. Had the Italian Army been smashed, that would have been the achievement of the Austrian Army. The German contingent would have been barely a fourth of the total force of the victors. The prestige

*Triumph for  
Conrad or  
Falkenhayn?*

of Austrian arms would have out-dazzled that of the invincible legions of Prussia. The struggle between Austria and Prussia for the hegemony of the German Empire had only been provisionally settled in a single battle as late as 1866. It was obviously undesirable that Austrian military prowess should be elevated above that of the North German. No true Prussian could contemplate such a prospect with equanimity, or help its attainment with any enthusiasm. Falkenhayn was a Prussian from heel to helmet. From the national as well as the personal point of view, a German victory at Verdun was more expedient for his country than an Austrian victory in the Trentino.

Falkenhayn himself came pretty near an admission of this motive in stating his reason for rejecting Conrad's scheme.

"When we come to the question how we are to proceed against England's tools on the Continent, Austria-Hungary is pressing for an immediate settlement of accounts with Italy. We cannot agree with that proposal. If we adopted it, it would advantage Austria-Hungary and her future prospects only, and not directly the prospects of the War as a whole."\*

*Falkenhayn's  
confession*

Did Falkenhayn put these considerations frankly before his Staff? I should be surprised if he did. I feel confident that he never put pen to paper to express or marshal those incentives to judgment. Did he ever even avow those motives to himself? Probably

\* General von Falkenhayn "General Headquarters, 1914-1916, and its critical Decisions," pp. 215-216.

not. Their influence was entirely subconscious if not unconscious. Nevertheless they were at the root of decision, a root which had penetrated too deeply into the soil in which it was planted to be visible even to his own eyes. The arguments used by him were purely strategical. The reasons he gives for preferring an offensive at Verdun rather than the Trentino are published in his book. They are obviously inadequate to sway the opinions of so clever a man and so capable a soldier. That does not mean that he had not honestly convinced himself that the Verdun offensive would achieve the aim for which it was designed—the destruction in detail of the most powerful of all the Allied Armies. He was sincerely persuaded that his plan was the best. Had it succeeded it would certainly have been the best. But the chances were against it. These he did not weigh impartially. Where a man is hesitating between two courses, for each of which there is much to be said, his predilections and prejudices weigh in heavily, and

“Where self the wavering balance shakes  
 ’Tis rarely right adjusted.”

Where the wider self known as patriotism also comes in, rare indeed (and unpopular) are the men who can preserve an unbiassed judgment.

Falkenhayn was as honourable a man as the War threw up in any camp. His patriotism was just as intense as that of Joffre, Nivelle, Foch, Cadorna, Haig and Robertson, but it was no narrower. Why, therefore, should it be assumed that their decisions on questions of military policy were more free from exotic elements than were Falkenhayn’s?

*Subconscious  
 prejudices*

*Analogy with  
 Allied Generals*

For Falkenhayn substitute Nivelle—for Conrad take Cadorna. For Prussia put France and for Austria write Italy. The analogy will then be complete and the inference irresistible. If Nivelle was persuaded that he would break through the German lines and march in the rear of his victorious armies to the re-conquest of Alsace, why should he forgo that triumph in order to enable Cadorna to redeem Trieste? If the French Army were assured by his scheme of the credit of smashing up at its strongest point the greatest military fortress the world had ever seen, why should that glittering prize be surrendered in order to give the soldiers of Italy the prestige ensuing from making a still wider and wiser gap in the walls of the same fortress elsewhere?

The French jealousy of Italy had in it an element which was lacking in the Prussian envy of Austria.

The French regarded the very existence of united Italy as a recent creation, brought into being by the valour of the French Army. For them Italy was still something to be patronised. By implication the French attitude to Italy was "Had we not fought and bled to make you a free country you would still have been an Austrian province." There was always an element of derision in every private reference made by Frenchmen to Italian soldiers and sailors. The French attitude towards Italy was expressed in the cynical comment of a French statesman, when Italy was hesitating as to whether she would throw in her lot with the Allies, or allow Austria to purchase her neutrality by territorial concessions. When asked what Italy was likely to do, he answered: "*Voler au secours du vainqueur.*" The brilliant feats of her soldiers in storming almost inaccessible mountain peaks, their

capture of entrenched defiles defended by a superior artillery, the heavy losses they sustained, largely because of their imperfect equipment, the marvellous achievements of her engineers—all these were completely ignored, and every Frenchman greeted any allusion to them with a gibe and a snort.

The following extract from a confidential report which I received from a well-informed official in Italy a few weeks after the Rome Conference, has a bearing upon this aspect of Franco-Italian relations :—

*Opinion  
in Rome*

“ . . . Looking ahead, the thing that alarms me most in regard to this country is her relations with France. In spite of all the outward glamour and talk of sister-relationships and the unity of the Latin races, there is little doubt in my mind that the Italians distrust the French profoundly and are thoroughly despised by the sister race. As the Ally of both, our true role would seem to be to endeavour to smooth over these exacerbated feelings, and to keep the balance even between the two : but our very evident following of the French lead, whether it be as regards Asia Minor negotiations, Venizelism and Greek politics, blockade matters or what not, tends, I am afraid, to fill the Italian mind with a distrust, not so much of our friendship or loyalty, as of our judgment and sense of proportion. I cannot resist a feeling that they look upon us as the dupes of the French, and to some extent I cannot help wondering whether they are not right. Italians are so level-headed where their interests are concerned that they must necessarily judge us rather by their own standard and criticise our more generous senti-



mentalism in matters where policy and principle conflict. . . ."

Briand and Thomas, the champions of an attack on Germany through Austria, became rank and almost rancorous Westerners when it was proposed to place Italy in the van of the Allied attack for 1917. Thomas and I were great friends. But he lost his temper with me at the Rome Conference when it was suggested that Italy should occupy the front seat in the 1917 campaign.

It was not altogether attributable to the desire of French statesmen that the weight of the Nivelle offensive should not be diminished by the withdrawal of forces to other fronts. Both Briand and Thomas were eloquently insistent on the need for strengthening our forces at Salonika in men and guns, but when the same process was suggested for the Italian Front then nothing could be spared from the Nivelle offensive. It was my first experience of this envious and supercilious attitude of mind on the part of French generals, statesmen and diplomats towards Italy. It was by no means my last. It is largely the explanation and justification of Mussolini's defiant mien and aggressiveness of tone during the first years of his rule. It is fair to say that the French were ready even to alacrity to rush to the aid of Italy when she was beaten by Austria at Caporetto. That was quite in accord with the historical role of France towards Italy. When, however, it was a question of helping Italy to enter first through the portals of the temple of victory and have the laurel wreath placed first on her brow, that prospect could not be endured by any patriotic

*Origin of  
Mussolini's  
attitude*

Frenchman—and all Frenchmen are patriotic. Better a doubtful battle in France with a possible victory, than an assured success in Italy with a probable triumph.

Robertson was not quite in the same position as Nivelle. As between Nivelle and Cadorna he had no prejudices in favour of either. They were both foreigners and consequently needed careful watching. His chronic xenophobia functioned impartially in that respect. Nivelle he actually disliked, Cadorna at that time he viewed with a certain measure of superior contempt. But the main British Army was in France and Flanders and therefore a territorial advance of a few kilometres there (preferably on Flemish soil) was more desirable than a decision elsewhere.

Later on he rested his opposition to a combined offensive on the Italian Front on the plea that if Austria were broken up by such an attack, Italy would make a separate peace with her beaten enemy and leave us in the lurch, with both Austria and Germany on our hands.\* It was an unworthy and unwarrantable insinuation against the honour of a great people. But the fact that it was in his mind proved that he did not rule out the probability of a complete success for an attack in that quarter.

The French and British Staffs based their objection to concentrating their heaviest blows on the weakest point on the ground that the highest strategical principles demanded an attack on the strongest enemy at his most formidable front. A remarkable doctrine. Had France and Flanders been the weakest front and Italy or the Balkans the strongest, Joffre, Nivelle, Haig and Robertson would have had no difficulty in

adapting their principles of strategy to the exigencies of that fact. Then I have no doubt they would have scoffed at the notion that you must seek the foe at his strongest. Robertson would have become a dogmatic and surly Cadornist, and probably Cadorna would have developed into a diffident and courtly Robertsonian.

It is interesting to note that six months after the Rome Conference, General Sir Ian Hamilton, writing on 11th July, 1917, to Mr. Winston Churchill, advanced quite independently the same view which I had urged upon my colleagues in Rome. In the course of his letter he said :—

*Sir Ian  
Hamilton's  
view*

“ Is there no other alternative now that it seems too late to hope to do anything in the East? I have racked my brains over the map and I believe that there is one good chance left (apart from the Russians). Were the Italian Army to be suddenly reinforced so that it could press forward northwards in the direction of Vienna, I believe they might break through and give a final shake to the Austrians. The German preparations, entrenchments and railway communications are not sufficiently good to enable them properly to forestall a thrust in that direction. The stupid idea of Trieste should be used as a pretence until the last moment and then entirely given up—it is a purely political idea and no good as a means of ending the War.

My view throughout has been that no General should attack his enemy where he is strongest. He holds him where he is strongest and attacks him where he is weakest. At the present moment the

north of Italy offers the best chance of anything in the nature of a really big gain of ground."

Sir Ian Hamilton was not a civilian politician, but a soldier with a distinguished record. He was perhaps better fitted for a Staff post than for a Commander in the field. He had acted as Chief of Staff to Lord Kitchener in South Africa, had been a member of the Army Council, and for five years, 1910-1915, was Inspector-General of our Overseas Forces, in addition to having commanded British forces in many campaigns. He was the only leading soldier who had actually seen and made a careful study of modern warfare. He saw the great battles of the Russo-Japanese War. He was certainly not the sort of person whose considered judgment on questions of military strategy could lightly be brushed aside ; and this makes his support for my proposal of an Italian campaign the more impressive.

Pétain and two other French Generals recommended the same plan in March as an alternative to the Nivelle offensive. The Rome proposal is taken out of the category of amateur strategy by the approval of these distinguished military leaders.

## CHAPTER XLIX

### JOFFRE

A CHANGE in the military leadership of France caused a change not in the strategy, but in the particular French villages where the same old strategy was to be practised. When I came into power Joffre was visibly tottering to his fall. For two and a half years he had been the virtual dictator of France. Governments carried out, or rather provided him with the means of carrying out the decrees he issued from Headquarters. He tolerated no civilian interference or suggestion as to his methods of conducting the War. A threat to resign on his part quelled doubting politicians or journalists and silenced all grumblers. His attitude towards changing Governments was that their sole business in war was to furnish men, munitions, and supplies to enable him to carry through such military dispositions as he, the Commander-in-Chief, ordered. Their functions ended at that point. As the whole strength of France was concentrated on the struggle with the invader, Joffre practically ruled the country. His insolent treatment of the men who warned him in time of the coming attack at Verdun shook his power, and his throne became more and more rickety. The disappointment caused by the sanguinary failure of the Somme to achieve its avowed purpose further weakened his authority. His neglect to make any

preparation to support Roumania in her challenge of the Central Powers destroyed what was left of his prestige. As Ludendorff points out, although the Allies had urged the Roumanians to throw in their lot with them, "no common scheme of co-operation had been settled." Although British Generals were just as much to blame as General Joffre, he alone was responsible to French opinion. In Britain the Government fell, in France the military Chief was blamed. The result was that in spite of M. Briand's efforts to protect him, he was gradually stripped of all power and on 12th December, 1916, he resigned the command.

As he was mainly responsible for the military policy of the Allies during the first three campaigns of the War—his ideas dictated even the strategy of

the British campaign—I should like to give my estimate of his qualities and defects. No one who ever came in contact

with him can doubt that he was a very remarkable man. But his strength lay in character, rather than in capacity. He had the build and the qualities of the peasant breed : powerfully built, he possessed courage, even to recklessness ; composure, even to stolidity ; craft, even to cunning. Had his mental been equal to his moral equipment, he would have been easily the greatest figure in the War. His patriotism, his uprightness, his courage, his firmness of purpose, and his devotion to duty were all above reproach and without blemish. He was

*Indomitable  
will and  
commonplace  
mind*

a man of indomitable will and of commonplace mind. He had unbounded confidence but a limited intelligence. The former gave him calm and composure in danger, the latter deprived him of the vision, breadth, and imagination essential to his colossal responsibility. He was faced

with a more tremendous military problem than ever confronted Napoleon, and he had to discharge it with the brain of an inferior Wellington or Grant. Like them he was a highly trained professional soldier with excellent abilities. He was like them a pertinacious fighter and an efficient tactician, and given inexhaustible resources he could like them have worn out genius in the end. His mind, as well as that of his British partner Haig, only worked well, like a primitive tank, when the objective

*Limited vision* was limited, and where the terrain was within the vision of their own eyes.

When that objective was reached, they had to re-charge and re-consider for the next move. When either of them had to aim at something wider and more distant and out of sight, they always came to grief. They were not intellectually geared, powered or petrolled for such a purpose.

Where reserves, either of men, material or mind are by no means overwhelming, stubborn perseverance in wasteful tactics may lead to disaster. This is what broke the ardent spirit of French patriotism temporarily in 1917. It broke finally the devoted

*Slavery to a "plan"* spirit of Russia. It almost wore down the stubborn spirit of the British troops in 1917. Joffre's generalship, which dominated the Allied strategy for four campaigns (for he shared the responsibility for the campaign of 1917),

had an ingenious and superstitious belief in the magic power of a "plan" without reference or adaptation to changing circumstances. A carefully thought out plan of campaign was of course essential. But for the Joffre mind a plan was something to be adhered to whatever new facts were revealed, whatever new conditions arose. A stubborn will, if controlled by a

supple and fertile brain, is invaluable in any great enterprise. But if it is wedded to a rigid and narrow mentality, blunders are inevitable. It is always tripping over a new fact, and tumbling into an ignored pitfall. The plan is infallible only if the enemy adapts himself to it. But he sometimes fails to do so. With a perfidy which General Joffre ought to have anticipated in so treacherous a foe, the German refused every time to play the part assigned to him in the plan. Allied Generals were guilty of a very common mistake—they credited their antagonists with possessing merely as good an intelligence as their own, whereas, in fact, they had sometimes a better.

*Failure to  
modify his  
1914 plan* Joffre's plan to counter a German invasion in 1914 was based on the assumption that even if the Germans passed through Belgium, they would march through the Ardennes and not further West. The mistake would not have been disastrous had he adapted his dispositions immediately to meet a move he had not expected. But what would then become of the great "plan"? The whole predestined scheme of salvation could not be thrown over owing to adverse and adventitious circumstances. When it was clear that the German armies meant to outflank French and British by pouring their troops through Maubeuge, the "plan" must by no means be abandoned. Hence the headlong rout and the occupation for over four years of the North-Western provinces of France. Joffre throughout his three campaigns persevered in all his offensives long after it had become clear to every intelligent soldier that he was gaining nothing but casualty lists that deprived his army of some of its best officers and men. He sacrificed the Balkans to one of his conventional offensives and to his obstinate refusal to



break off the attack even after it had completely failed. He was the paragon type of those military idols whom the Allied nations worshipped so devotedly, although they suffered so much from their incompetence—the great Generals who never learnt anything from failure except how to stage an even bloodier fiasco.

*Persistence  
in futile  
offensives*

Joffre, Haig and Robertson had much in common. Joffre was the most forceful personality of the three, and of course had a much wider training and experience in the handling of masses of men. But they had all largely the same qualities and the same limitations.

*Similarities  
to Haig and  
Robertson*

They were genuine patriots. That did not differentiate them from millions of their fellow-countrymen during the War where, in Britain alone, over 4,000,000 young men volunteered to face mutilation and death for their country, without prospect of braid or brass to decorate or distinguish them. The three were industrious workers, who did their duty honestly according to their understanding of it. This also, fortunately for mankind, is a commonplace quality, possessed by the majority of toilers in every sphere to which it has pleased God to call them. They were also men with a knowledge of their craft, acquired by much study and some little experience. In that respect they were inferior to craftsmen in any other trade or art, for their experience before the War had, happily for mankind, been very limited. None of them had taken part in a war under modern conditions, or ever seen one. Their experience, such as it was, was very stale, and quite inapplicable to the job they had in hand. Patriotism, integrity, industry, study, and some grain of experience were essentials of

*Military  
inferior to  
civilian  
craftsmanship*

their high responsibility, but by no means the only attributes that leadership in such an immense undertaking demanded. There ought to have been

*What these  
Generals  
lacked* initiative, resource, pliability, vision, imagination, aptitude to learn from experience, courage and skill to profit by, and not to persist in mistakes. In all

these respects these honourable men had grave deficiencies, and the world is suffering to-day from the results of their shortcomings.

French statesmen had been quite conscious of Joffre's inadequacy for some time. They had historical precedents which ought to have stimulated them to a quicker decision in disposing of him. The French Revolution was saved by the promptitude with which Generals who failed were removed. The Allies in this war had been beaten in nine out of every ten of the battles they fought, owing to the reluctance which they displayed to substitute the efficient for the inefficient and the adequate for the misfits. Joffre himself had set an excellent example of the way with Generals who were unequal to their responsibilities, when he dismissed platoons of them after the great retreat. But he got rid of them before they had acquired any public reputation.

*Tenacity of  
public  
confidence* Just like the British public with Kitchener, the French public—and that included soldiers—retained their belief in Joffre long after those who transacted business with him had ceased to have any faith in his competence. His resolute countenance inspired a sense of strength. That is what a harried people instinctively seek in trouble. They make the mistake of thinking that the seat of intelligence is in the chin. Great generals, dictators, and bruisers always have that

grim feature. It gives confidence to their backers. Joffre was therefore a popular figure.

Why did they not remove him? The victory of the Marne saved him from the consequences of his gravest blunder. That triumph lifted him from penalty to pedestal. Then followed a gruesome series of repulses which by every criterion set up by military history would have been ranked as sanguinary defeats. Why was he not deprived of his command then? Was there anyone who had displayed any greater capacity for command available to replace him? Foch was implicated in most of Joffre's failures from Artois to the Somme. He was therefore ruled out as an eligible successor. Besides, both he and Castelnau were devout and pronounced Catholics, and susceptibilities born of bitter reminiscence had converted that faith into a disqualification for superior command. In France, Pétain, Mangin, and Franchet d'Esperey were successes—but had so far given no indication of the brilliant gifts that make for great military leadership in a World War. Nivelle was Joffre's own choice when he realised that the command of the French Army in the field was to pass from his hands. Statesmen are reluctant to remove officials who are honestly doing their duty to the best of their ability merely because they fail in difficult undertakings, unless they are sure of finding an abler substitute. There was nothing better than Joffre visible to the naked eye of the French politician. So Joffre clung to his exalted office with tarnished glory and waning influence at home and abroad.

And now he had gone entirely. He was given the baton of a Marshal of France to hang in the salon of a Parisian villa, and Nivelle took his place.

## CHAPTER L

### THE NIVELLE OFFENSIVE

WITH or without Russia the Western Allies were committed to fight out the issue until an honourable peace was attainable. The internecine troubles of the great Eastern Power did not therefore derange or delay the preparations made for a renewal of the struggle on the Western Front. The Chantilly scheme was pressed on according to plan, as if nothing had happened to disturb the calculations upon which it was based. It was assumed by all the commanders in the field, as well as by the Staff advisers of the Governments, that the Russian Army would play the part allotted to it in the campaign, perhaps with renewed energy. Castelnau alone expressed any doubts on the point, and he did not embody his misgivings in his official report.

With the departure of Joffre, many expected a reversal of the profligate strategy of throwing masses of men against an impenetrable labyrinth of trenches, bristling with machine-guns and defended by the most powerful artillery and best trained infantry, on the offchance that some of the assailants might find a way through and out.

Joffre's successor, General Nivelle, was known to be a good soldier with a record of prudent, skilful and successful generalship in the grim struggle around Verdun. Of his endowments as a strategist on a

vaster field of operations nothing was proved. But his brilliant record at Verdun and our knowledge of his intellectual quality led us to look forward to a fresh survey, by a fresh mind. *Nivelle's war record* unhampered by commitments or traditions, of the possibilities of the vast battlefield of the War. Thus might be discovered some wall in the rampart that compassed the Central Powers more vulnerable than the bastion which had so far defied every effort made to reduce it or break through, by the strongest armies and the most formidable machines of the Allies. Our expectations were doomed to disappointment. There is no evidence that General Nivelle gave a thought to any front except the one where he was to command.

*Concerned only with French Front*

Unfortunately the French Government, instead of putting him in charge of the whole War—as for all practical purposes was Joffre—limited his sphere to the command of the French Army operating in France. The other fronts were for him “out of bounds” for study and action. When invited to consider other possibilities, he dismissed every suggestion with a curt and peremptory refusal even to enter into a discussion on the subject. It was not his affair, except to the extent that operations on any other battlefield involved a depletion of the resources at his disposal for his own sector of the vast circumvallation. Any project or strategy that took guns and men away from the Armies under his direction must be discouraged. Epauletted egoism is impenetrable to the assault of ideas. The battle front where the *Generalissimo* commanded—there was the War. Every other front or flank was a “side-show.” How in 1917 that infatuation led the French Army to the brink of irreparable catastrophe,

and the pick of the British Army to a muddy graveyard, is a story which must be told in detail later on. But when it was a question of reconsidering Chantilly tactics, Nivelle was only too ready. He had to justify the change in command. How was that to be done?

To be fair to him, he had some new ideas which were successfully exploited by his successors and opponents at a later stage in the War. *New ideas not carried out* But he himself failed to put them into execution through causes for which he was not exclusively responsible. The result was that the slaughter was continued by the same butting and bumping methods as those adopted by his predecessor. The site of Aeldama alone was changed. The field of blood was removed from the Somme Plateau to that of the Chemin des Dames. That was in effect the only gain achieved by the substitution of Nivelle for Joffre.

How came the Allies to slither back into the old sanguinary military ruts? I propose to tell the story without reference to its effect on the reputation of any soldier or statesman who played a part in its construction—whether it be my own or others. It is time the whole of the facts about both the Nivelle and the Passchendaele offensives should be stated without variation or varnish to suit anybody.

The “way round” was for the moment effectively barred. I have already explained why a Balkan operation was, for this year, out of the question. *No alternative to Western Front* The way through Italy was not available. The timidity of Cadorna and the flabbiness of the Italian Ministry had enabled the French to slam that gate with the greatest ease. There was another circumstance which led

to a recrudescence of the Western offensive fever. Up to December the French Army and the French people—and they were identical, for almost every French home was represented in the Army—were completely disillusioned about the prospect of a break-through on their front. Every French soldier who defended the shell-holes of Verdun or the ruins of one of its shattered forts, and every soldier who had attacked the defended puddles of the Somme, knew that unparalleled gallantry in attack was countered by equal valour in defence, and that neither German nor Frenchman could penetrate even shattered entrenchments defended by the other in time to prevent another line, equally difficult to capture, being thrown up behind. If Joffre had remained at the head of the Army, I doubt whether a French Government or the French people would have agreed to a second Somme campaign. Joffre, who was not without understanding of the temper of his countrymen, realised this to the full, and he imparted the information to Sir Douglas Haig, with a view to inducing him to undertake the heavier and bloodier burden of the 1917 offensive. Haig, who had become a Somme bigot, readily assented. He had a magnificent army of trained volunteers, the flower of Britain's youth. They were backed up by a fine assortment of new guns of the latest pattern. Hence the Chantilly agreement.

Then came one of those sudden changes to which the French are more amenable than their phlegmatic neighbours across the Channel. Joffre went, and Nivelle came. Nivelle had been for five months a successful defender of the Verdun heights. That in itself gave him an assured position in the heart of every

*Nivelle's  
achievements  
at Verdun*

Frenchman and Frenchwoman. It is difficult for Britons to realise what Verdun means to France. The world can show no battlefield to correspond to it. On those heights Gaul and Teuton had, from the blizzards of February to the snows of the following December, been fighting out a racial feud which had existed for thousands of years. The concentrated fury of ages raged and tore, shattered and killed for ten months in one intensive struggle which has no parallel in the history of human savagery. The very road that carried the reinforcements, the guns and the shells that redeemed Verdun, is to this hour for Frenchmen the Via Sacra of their country.

The General who had taken a leading and successful part in organising and directing its defence had a place of his own in the affection and admiration of his countrymen. What magnetised his name with a new thrill of hope was a recent episode in the defence of Verdun which established his reputation, not merely as a tenacious defensive, but as a skilful offensive General. To him was attributed the skilful plan which by a dramatic stroke recaptured the fort of

*His recapture  
of Douaumont*

Douaumont. The fall of Douaumont to the Germans in February had rankled in the French mind. The Germans had driven the French out of a fortress which was in itself an engineering feat of which they were proud, and in whose strength they reposed the most implicit trust. The man who recaptured Douaumont was therefore a hero. It was a *coup-de-main*, but it was also the result of plans minutely worked out and precisely executed. He had hardly been three days in the saddle as Commander-in-Chief when there was launched another equally well-planned attack on the Verdun Front, securing



an element of surprise by the shortness but concentrated power of the artillery bombardment, and the rush of troops advancing behind an effective artillery barrage. In 48 hours he had recovered a further extensive strip of ground and captured 11,000 prisoners. The number of his prisoners alone exceeded that of his total losses in the victorious engagement. Here, indeed, had arisen the long expected military leader for bleeding France—a Captain who could win battles without sacrificing his brave legionaries.

It is interesting, in view of Sir William Robertson's subsequent general attitude towards General Nivelle, to give here his report to the War Cabinet on General Nivelle's successful operation of 16th December, 1916, together with his comments on the strategy of that operation :—

*Robertson's  
report on  
Nivelle's  
tactics*

“ 21st December, 1916.

The French attack at Verdun appears to have been a complete surprise to the enemy. A heavy bombardment had been maintained for about a week previously on both banks of the Meuse and this probably misled him as to the point of attack. The early capture of the Côte de Poivre seems to have led to considerable numbers of the enemy having their retreat cut off. . . . The enemy's losses, in addition to prisoners, were probably extremely heavy. The actual numbers engaged on each side were approximately equal. . . . Both on 24th October and on 15th December, at Verdun, the enemy were surprised and their resistance was easily overcome by equal or even inferior numbers, and unusually large captures of prisoners and guns were made. In the attack on 15th

December, the French took in prisoners about one-third of the total fighting strength of the enemy, a proportion which is greatly in excess of the number of prisoners secured by either side in any previous engagement on the Western Front. . . .

The French success shows once more what can be accomplished at little cost, even by comparatively small numbers, if the attack is thoroughly prepared and organised, *and especially if measures are taken to ensure surprise.* In this case the Germans must have known by the preliminary bombardment that an attack would be made, but the surprise was effected by varying the method of attack, by distributing the bombardment over a much wider front than that selected for the attack, by commencing the intense bombardment on the actual front of attack, before dawn, and by launching the infantry assault before it was expected by the enemy. . . .

A great deal has been written in the press about the 'Nivelle method,' which is sometimes compared favourably with the British tactics on the Somme. The so-called 'Nivelle method' depends mainly upon a meticulously careful artillery preparation, combined with a system of artillery barrage, one line of which moves forward directly in front of the attacking infantry. If this method is to be successful, it is essential that the infantry have complete confidence in the accuracy and timing of the artillery fire. . . ."

These two brilliant victories sent a quiver of joy and expectancy through the whole of France, but the factor that impressed the French mind most of

all was that by the suddenness and unexpectedness of his attacks Nivelle had won these triumphs at a low price in casualties. A country desolated and darkened by the sacrifice of Verdun and by the mournful butcheries of Artois, Champagne and the

*French  
enthusiasm  
for Nivelle*

Somme, hailed the appearance of this new leader as they would a deliverer. Public opinion in France was worked up to a pitch of exultation, and was prepared to welcome any plan that emanated from the brain of such a General. When, therefore, there were carefully disseminated rumours that he had a fresh plan and a fresh method for breaking through the German ramparts and driving the hated invader in headlong rout from the soil of France, the demand that this new plan should be at once tried became irresistible. I had noted the change when I met the cautious Ribot at the London Conference, near the end of December. When a few days later I travelled with the French Delegation to Rome,

*Briand and  
Thomas  
converted to  
offensive in  
the West*

I found the fermentation had touched M. Briand and M. Albert Thomas, who had always hitherto been confirmed believers in the "way round." They had both been accustomed to talk with derision of the expectations of the two G.H.Q.'s that "this time a break-through was inevitable." I was therefore astonished to witness the change that had taken place in their attitude, for now they were ardent advocates of another great offensive on the Western Front, with a view to a rupture of the German line. I have already quoted a passage from M. Briand's speech at the Rome Conference, in which he showed clearly that his change of mind was attributable to the confidence which had been engendered by the Verdun

success in the superior military genius of the new Commander-in-Chief. He laid stress on the essential difference between this kind of offensive and all the others with which they had been afflicted, and between the caution of this newly-revealed strategist and the buoyant unreliability of his predecessor. Albert Thomas, who at conferences and private conversations had been an unrelenting critic of the Western offensives, I found now to be an equally implacable advocate of the Nivelle attack. He objected to a single gun being taken away from so promising an operation. It was clear that these two eminent statesmen had been swept off their feet by the torrent of enthusiasm for the new method and the new man.

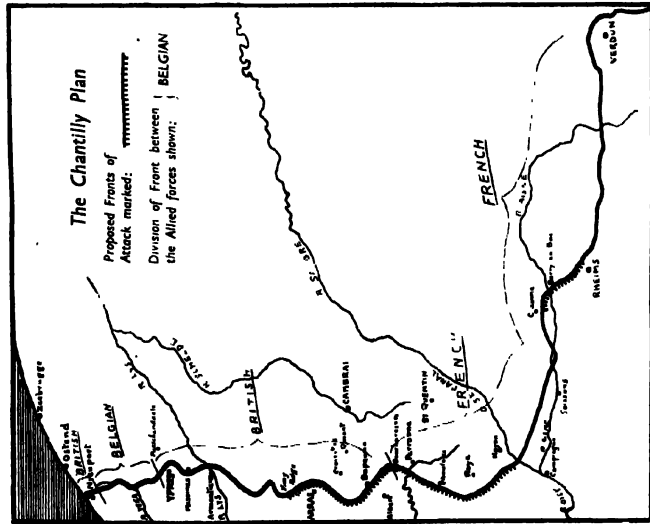
I realised after the Rome Conference that a rigid opposition to this experiment might have disastrous consequences for the Allies. Had Cadorna and his Ministers shown more enterprise, there was a possibility even then of stemming a current of the result of which I expressed myself at the Rome Conference to be apprehensive. But the moment the combined Italian campaign was ruled out by French resistance and Italian indifference, the only alternative to trying the Nivelle scheme was to do nothing but squat each of us in his own trenches waiting for something to turn up. America had not yet declared war and there was no fresh hope in any quarter of the Allies. The Eastern horizon looked dark and stormy. The Western was still a surly grey. The effect on French opinion of a refusal to play our part would have been calamitous. France was unhappy and might easily get out of hand. In spite of the most enormous efforts and the most terrible sacrifices, some of the most prosperous provinces of France were still

*Danger of  
persistent  
opposition to  
their plan*

# THE JOFFRE AND NIVELLE OFFENSIVES

Western Front, Nov., 1916

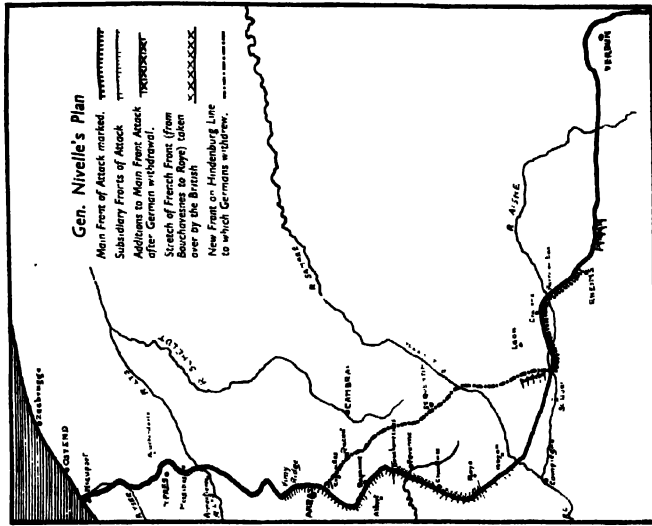
Showing Offensives proposed at Chantilly by Joffre.



# THE JOFFRE AND NIVELLE OFFENSIVES

Western Front, Jan. and March, 1917

Showing Offensives proposed by Nivelle, and extension of British Line.





occupied by the invader. Three sanguinary campaigns had failed to release the cruel grip of the foe upon more than a few kilometres of French soil.

Every millimetre of the liberated earth was rent deeply by the cruel claws of war and reddened by the blood of the liberating troops. Hundreds of the towns and villages of France and thousands of kilometres of her richest fields were devastated. She was bleeding from every vein, still on her feet facing the foe, but staggering. Now there burst upon her a new hope of speedy deliverance. Had she been thwarted in her expectation at that time she might have sulked. As usual the politicians would have been blamed in both countries. To stand blame is primarily their function. The bureaucrats govern and the politicians share the praise, but monopolise the blame. Briand and his Ministers would certainly have disappeared. Who would have come next? Peradventure Clemenceau, but perhaps Caillaux! Peace at this stage would not have been distinguishable from an acknowledgment of defeat, and could only have been concluded on that assumption.

The new hope had gathered such an impetus by the date of the first Allied Conference held in London at Christmas, that nothing could have arrested it but the flaming ramparts of the Chemin des Dames. It had all the unreason and extravagance of a religious and patriotic revival. In the absence of M. Briand through illness, M. Ribot *who demands our consent to Nivelle plan* demanded with unwonted peremptoriness that the British Cabinet should there and then give their assent to the Nivelle plan, which involved the co-operation of the British Army in an attack on the German lines at a point and by

methods which it was claimed differed from those to which we were committed by the Paris Conference of November. Nivelle had been Commander-in-Chief for only just a fortnight. The ink was scarcely dry on his new Victory March when the Conference met.

The first I heard of the change in plans was on the evening preceding the Conference. I was then put in possession of its general outline. It was Christmas Day. What a day to be devoted by a British Cabinet to the consideration of a plan by which 2,000,000 young men drawn from three Christian nations were to rend and tear each other to pieces! But war knows no sanctities. The barbaric expedient of war which did not spare the stately cathedrals of France and Flanders, and massacres the innocents by bombs in a hundred Bethlehems, would not hesitate about spending a Christmas Festival on schemes of triumphant slaughter. No one gave a thought to the pacific tradition of the day. To quote Burns about another transgression, war "hardens all within and petrifies the feelings."

It appeared that the new plan had been communicated to Sir Douglas Haig on 21st December, 1916, in the following letter, where its leading features are explained with truly French lucidity :—

" My dear General,

Following on our conversation of 20th December, I have the honour to set out for you as follows my views on the subject of our offensive in 1917, and on the modifications which I think it indispensable to introduce into the original plan of these operations.

*Nivelle's letter  
to Haig*



*Objective.*—In the 1917 offensive, the Franco-British Armies must aim at the destruction of the principal mass of the enemy armies in the Western theatre. This result can only be obtained by means of a decisive battle, engaged in with a considerable numerical superiority against all the forces at the disposal of the enemy.

Our concern is then :—

To retain as important a part as possible of the adverse forces ;

To break the enemy's front under such conditions that the rupture can be immediately exploited ;

To beat down all the available forces which the enemy can bring against us ;

To exploit with all our means the results of this decisive battle.

*Necessary means.*—To realise this programme, it is indispensable to have at our disposal, apart from the forces destined at the outset to hold the enemy and break his front, a mass of manœuvre powerful enough to be certain of beating down all available hostile forces.

I consider that this mass can only be constituted of homogeneous forces possessing full cohesion and trained for their task by commanders who will have to employ them. It follows that these forces could not be made up by drawing on armies charged with the execution of an offensive of attrition or the rupture of the enemy front.

I estimate that a group of three armies, each consisting of three corps of three divisions apiece is the force necessary for this mass of manœuvre.

*General Shape of the Operations.*—Starting from

these assumptions, I conceive as follows the development of the operations of our armies.

*French and British roles in the offensive* The enemy forces will be held in the sector Arras-Bapaume and in that between the Oise and the Somme by means of attacks carried out respectively by the Armies under your orders and by the French forces.

*During this time, a sudden attack carried out upon another part of the French Front will lead to a breakthrough.* This will be immediately followed by a broadening out into the decisive battle.

This battle, the effects of which will not fail to make themselves felt along the whole extent of our front, will bring about an exploitation over a wide area in which the French Armies and the British Armies will take part with all the means they can bring to bear.

*Constitution of the Mass of Manœuvre.*—The success of our operations will thus depend essentially upon the mass of manœuvre.

For the reasons which I have given you above (homogeneity, cohesion, instruction, command) I consider that this force must be distinct from the large units charged with carrying out the attack to the north of the Oise and with making the breakthrough.

Now it is impossible for me in the present state of the division of the front between our Allied Armies to form this reserve of 27 divisions.

To allow me to make it, it is indispensable that the British Armies shall relieve an important part of the French troops which hold the front between the Somme and the Oise, and that in this connection they shall put at my disposal the French

*British to take over more front*

divisions in position between *Bouchavesnes* and the *Amiens-Roye* road. I reckon that this front can be held easily by *seven or eight divisions*, which would correspond to the density of the German forces that are facing it.

*This relief would have to be carried out without any delay unless it is to cause a serious postponement of the preparation for our coming offensive ; so I ask you to have it carried out at the latest by 15th January.*

*Role of the British Armies.*—Summarily stated, the role of the British Armies in our joint offensive should be :—

1. To allow me to constitute without delay the mass of manœuvre indispensable for the decisive battle.

2. To undertake upon the front where you have determined to attack, an offensive large enough and powerful enough to absorb an important part of the German reserves. I consider that your front of attack ought to have an extent of *30 to 40 kilometres*, according to whether you do or do not reckon to leave passive intervals in it.

3. To participate in the general exploitation which will follow the decisive battle delivered in another sector, by achieving the disorganisation of the forces established before your front of attack, and by carrying on the pursuit of the enemy in a zone which we will later on fix by common agreement.

In so defining the task of the British Armies, I wish to make it clear to you that I also envisage the possible employment of my mass of manœuvre on the right wing of our front.

If the enemy attempted an offensive across Switzerland, I should thus not find it necessary to ask you to put a part of your forces at my disposition in order to oppose it.

On the other hand, it is evident that this reserved group of armies will work in the general battle as much for the profit of your armies as for mine.

Further, the extension of front which I am asking from you will in a certain measure dispense your armies from pursuing the execution of the offensive operations which they were due to undertake in the course of the winter, in accordance with the decisions taken at the Conference of Chantilly of 15th November last.

Finally, the plan of operations which I have set before you does not exclude the possibility of carrying out, if the necessity arises, the operation aiming at the conquest of Ostend and Zeebrugge, since this cannot take place before the summer.

*Flanders  
offensive not  
ruled out*

This operation can be studied in all its details on the basis of the decision already adopted, and I even consider that our Belgian Allies ought to prepare themselves from now on for the role they will have to play in it.

If our big offensive succeeds, it is certain that the Belgian coast will fall into our hands as a result of the retreat of the German Armies, and without a direct attack.

If on the contrary our attacks fail, it will always be possible to carry out in due course the operations projected in Flanders.

In concluding this explanation, I ask you to be so good as to give me, as early as possible, your reply on the subject of the taking over of the front

between Bouchavesnes and the Roye road. The constitution of my available troops in view of the various eventualities that may present themselves is really a vital question which I desire to solve without any delay.

Cordially yours,  
NIVELLE."

Both the French and the British Armies were to conduct an offensive more or less on the old lines, each on its own front. But a formidable "mass of manoeuvre" was to be constituted behind the French Front, and after the two armies had started their attacks, this mass was without warning to be flung suddenly on the enemy on another part of the French Front.

It will be observed that in its general character it differed fundamentally from the Chantilly scheme. Its success depended on the suddenness of the attack and on misleading the enemy as to the sector where the main effort was to be expected. In no respect was the change more apparent than in the role which it assigned to the British Army. To this change more than to any other is attributable the hostility of Sir Douglas Haig. In the Chantilly scheme the main burden of the attack fell upon the British, and Sir Douglas Haig would have played the leading part in the projected offensive. By the Nivelle scheme the French were to bear practically the main burden of the attack, and the part assigned to the British Army was first of all to take over a part of the French line so as to release troops for the attacking force; and to hold the Germans down on their own front by a subordinate offensive, so as to make it impossible for

*Minor part  
assigned to  
British Army*

the enemy to spare troops from that sector to rescue their comrades from the plight into which the French surprise assault would plunge them further south. The secondary part allocated to the British Army in this plan was bitterly resented by Sir Douglas Haig. This resentment is apparent in the reply sent by Sir Douglas Haig to General Nivelle's communication :—

“ Montreuil,  
23rd December, 1916.

In reply to your letter from General Nivelle, General Haig made this morning the following declaration :—

*Haig's reply  
to Nivelle*

1. The request of the French Command involves the use of ten British divisions ; there would only remain eight divisions available, of which the worth of six is very mediocre.\*

2. General Haig cannot under present conditions accept a situation which would remove all offensive capacity from his armies.

3. He has accordingly referred the question to the British War Committee, asking it to send to France the necessary divisions to satisfy the request of the French Command.  
*More divisions  
wanted from  
home and  
Salonika*

4. He insistently demands the return of the divisions at Salonika.

5. The relief could be begun 15 days from now, and continued as fast and as far as new divisions arrived, if sent.

\* This is a characteristic objection. When the Commander-in-Chief later on was persuading the Cabinet to assent to the Passchendaele attack he had 42 divisions available for the operations—all of the best. Now he cannot spare ten divisions for a plan he dislikes.

6. It is to be anticipated that the British General Staff will raise difficulties about extending relief to the South of the Amiens-Peronne road, desiring to retain the troops at their disposal for offensive action."

Sir Douglas Haig's proposal that the taking over of part of the French line, which was an essential element in the scheme for creating a mass of manoeuvre for the attack, should be conditional on British divisions being withdrawn from Salonika to make up the deficit created in Sir Douglas Haig's offensive power, was impracticable. It was a *A ludicrous proposition* ludicrous proposition, having regard to circumstances which must have been well known to the British Commander-in-Chief. At that moment the French, British and Italian General Staffs were anticipating an overwhelming attack upon the Salonika position from the victorious forces of the Central Powers in the North. There was some ground for apprehending that the Greek Army was very much tempted to join in the enemy attack. General Joffre had urged us to send two more divisions to reinforce our contingent in that sphere. We were pressing the Italians to do the same thing. Sir William Robertson was actually making arrangements for sending a reinforcement of 15,000 men to Salonika. Sir Douglas Haig must have known all that and his proposal must have been made with a view to upsetting the new plan. He must have known that even if ten divisions could have been drawn from Salonika they would not reach France before the middle or the end of February. He also knew that the reason assigned by us for refusing to agree to Joffre's proposal that we should send two

divisions to Salonika was that the necessary shipping was not available to transport so many divisions.

How then were we to find ships for ten divisions? As soon as General Nivelle received the communication, he wired to the French Minister of War :—

“ 24th December, 1916.

*Personal.*

I have the honour to send you copies of the following :—

1. The letter which I sent to General Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces in France, to arrange with him the plan of operations to be carried out in 1917.

*Nivelle asks  
his Government  
to intervene*

2. The telegram which General des Vallières, Head of the French Military Mission with the British Army, sent me as an indication of the views of General Haig on this matter.

It appears from the above-mentioned telegram that General Haig has referred the question to the English War Committee, and made it conditional on a reinforcement of the British forces in France.

On the other hand, I saw to-day at my General Headquarters General Davidson, Head of the Operations Branch of the British Army, who repeated to me on behalf of General Haig that *the latter was in full agreement with me about the general plan of the projected operations*, and in consequence upon the necessity of releasing, by taking over their part of the front, the French forces indispensable for this operation, and that he would do all he could to give me entire satisfaction.



This he can do by a combination of three methods :—

(a) Extension of the front of the divisions in the line. (The British Army seems to take this course only with a certain timidity, seeing that it counts on holding a front which does not amount to a quarter of the total front, with a number of divisions superior to that which we use ourselves for holding the remainder of the front, although our divisions are much inferior in effectives to the English divisions.)

(b) Provisional reduction in their reserves, without there resulting any difficulty for them in taking part in the spring offensives, under the conditions agreed on.

(c) Reinforcement by fresh divisions coming from England.

It is undeniable that the co-operation which we are asking from the British Army is relatively much less than that which we are undertaking on our part ; it is perfectly reconcilable with the special ulterior projects of the English Command which cannot in any case be put in hand before the summer.

*The finding of a solution of these questions becomes a matter of special urgency, since according to the decisions taken at the last meeting of the Inter-Allied General Staffs held at Chantilly, we ought to be ready for any eventuality by the end of the first fortnight of February.* The fears which have been manifested with regard to the Swiss Frontier make it necessary for us on the other

hand to form as speedily as possible the necessary mass of manœuvre.

So it seemed to me that you might consider it useful as a preliminary measure to entrust to one of the members of the Government who have continually to be going to London, the mission of supporting with his high authority, when meeting the

English Prime Minister and General Robertson, the point of view which I have adopted ; of insisting on the necessity of giving General Haig the necessary instructions ; and of speeding up the dispatch of English Territorial divisions destined for the French Front, so that the relief of our divisions can take place as near as possible to the time I have indicated.

I venture to insist upon the decisive importance of the plan of operations for 1917, and upon the serious inconvenience which would result from undertaking them with insufficient means.

R. NIVELLE."

The purport of these interchanges was communicated to the War Cabinet the evening before the Anglo-French Conference of 26th December. We had no opportunity of conferring upon the subject with either the Chief of the Staff or the Commander-in-Chief. This will explain the discussions at this Conference.

Mr. Buchan, in his "History of the War," lapsing into his fictional mood, gives a fanciful picture of my meeting General Nivelle at the Gare du

*Buchan's stroke of fiction* Nord on my way back from the Rome Conference in January, of his seizing the opportunity afforded by the *dix minutes d'arrêt* at the station to unfold to me his great strategical plan, and he proceeds to tell how, having

heard it for the first time, I instantly caught fire. When a brilliant novelist assumes the unaccustomed role of a historian it is inevitable that he should now and again forget that he is no longer writing fiction, but that he is engaged on a literary enterprise where narration is limited in its scope by the rigid bounds of fact. Had he taken the trouble to read the documents which were in the possession of the War Office and therefore available to him, he would have known, first, that the Nivelle plan had been revealed to me by 25th December, and actually discussed at a War Cabinet on the 26th December, a week before I started

*My opposition to Nivelle plan* for Rome. In the second place he would have known that at the Rome Conference

I expressed my doubt about the success of an offensive in France, and suggested an alternative field for operations, and that this alternative had been opposed, as both the British and French military staffs, who were intent on an offensive operation on the French Front, had accepted the general outline of the Nivelle scheme. The précis of the debate on that subject which I have already quoted, amply bears out this statement. And thirdly, he would have known that at the Paris Station I declined to discuss the plan with General Nivelle in the absence of Sir Douglas Haig. That also is officially recorded. Three fundamental inaccuracies in a single sentence are not a bad achievement even for a writer who has won fame by inventing his facts. The real explanation is that Mr. Buchan found it so much less trouble to repeat War Office gossip than to read War Office documents.

And now to revert to the Conference of the 26th to 28th December, at which we had our first discussions on the Nivelle plan.

With the intolerance of a devotee urging the glad tidings of a new evangel, M. Ribot, on behalf of the French Government, urged that we should there and then, without consulting flesh and blood in the shape of military advisers, decide the issues which had been raised in the correspondence between the two Commanders-in-Chief. We, however, insisted upon an opportunity being afforded us for consultation with Sir Douglas Haig. At one of the sittings of the Conference I said that I agreed that the question was very urgent. But General Nivelle had only been in command of the French Armies for a fortnight. The first that His Majesty's Government had heard of this new scheme was on the previous day. It meant a tremendous change in the plan of operations, and His Majesty's Government must really consult not only General Robertson, but also their General in the Field, Sir Douglas Haig. The Cabinet considered that the question must be left for a short time to see whether Sir Douglas Haig and General Nivelle could not arrive at a decision. It looked as if they could, but if that failed, the French Government should then approach His Majesty's Government, who quite agreed as to the necessity of very early decision and action.

*Ribot urges  
the plan*

*I insist on  
consulting  
Haig*

*No opposition  
from C.I.G.S.*

After a good deal of further unreasonable insistence on the part of the French delegates, I replied that I did not think that M. Ribot would ask His Majesty's Government to overrule their General Commanding-in-Chief without at least hearing what he had to say. The Cabinet were sympathetic, but they must first hear Sir Douglas Haig. "There was no opposition from

*the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, who was sure that the question could be satisfactorily arranged."*

From this last sentence it is clear that at this meeting Sir William Robertson did not personally object to the Nivelle scheme. He certainly offered no criticism and expressed no doubt. He was only anxious to carry Sir Douglas Haig's assent. According to Nivelle's letter of the 21st December, Sir Douglas Haig had at first notified his approval of the new plan. But Sir William Robertson knew that by this time the Commander-in-Chief was rattled and disappointed by the transference to the French Army of the leading part for which he had been designated by Chantilly. So long, however, as the fight was to be on the Western Front, the C.I.G.S. was satisfied and he thought the Commander-in-Chief could also be reconciled.

This is a minute of the conclusion arrived at :—

“ The proposal of the French representatives for an immediate extension of the line held by the British Army on the Western Front was received with complete sympathy by the British War Cabinet, but before a final decision was reached as to exactly how far the British line could be extended, the British War Cabinet felt that the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force must be consulted. The War Cabinet instructed the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to inform General Sir Douglas Haig that they desired him to conform to the wishes of the French Government in this matter to the utmost possible extent.

It was agreed that if an arrangement satisfactory to the French Government could not be reached in

*Conclusion  
of London  
Conference*

the immediate future between General Sir Douglas Haig and General Nivelle, the question should be raised again by the French Government."

I do not propose to give a detailed account of the difficult negotiations that led up to the final arrangements for the Nivelle offensive. That would occupy too much space. I have perused with arduous care the mass of correspondence, memoranda, and minutes which constitute the full record of what took place before the operations of April, 1917, commenced, and I propose to summarise them so as to give a fair and impartial impression of what happened.

*Character of  
the Nivelle  
plan*

What in effect was the Nivelle plan and in what respect did it differ from all other "break-through" offensives which had hitherto made such a revolting panorama of gruesome failure?

The essential change of policy was in the element of surprise. Nivelle emphasised this factor as the main idea in his strategical conception of a successful offensive. The enemy must be attacked on an unexpected front at a time when he was not anticipating any operation in that quarter. He would therefore not have any reserves assembled and ready to beat off the attack. A break-through at that point would thus be less difficult, less costly and more easily exploited. The preliminary bombardment at the critical point would be heavy but short and sharp. The offensive as a whole would be on a much wider front than any attack yet staged. But its principal feature was that it would mystify the enemy as to the place of the main attack, and thus take the Germans completely by surprise. It was a brilliant strategical

*Element of  
surprise*

conception. Why did it fail so disastrously? In the main, if not entirely, because in the working out of the plan, surprise, which was the essential condition of its success, totally disappeared. Whose fault was that? It is invidious to distribute blame, and it would be difficult in this case to distribute it fairly. But of this I have no doubt: the fault lies with both parties—French as well as British, British as well as French, but for reasons which will appear in the narrative the failure to conceal the plan from the enemy was attributable to French carelessness. There were two elements in the surprise: one was a change in the terrain of the general attack. The Germans were expecting a renewal of the attack of the Somme plateau mainly from the British Army. That was the Chantilly scheme and the Germans saw the usual preparations made in that area for a great offensive. Nivelle's mass of manoeuvre was intended for an attack in a totally different area, where the Germans did not anticipate any assault on their line. The part to be played by the British was that of a "holding" attack. Thus the enemy would be taken unawares, and would have their reserves distributed on a wide front, whilst the point at which the real onslaught was to be made would be without any reserves.

*Ludendorff's  
testimony  
to Nivelle's  
choice of front*

The new sector chosen by Nivelle for his main assault was peculiarly adapted to preparation without being observed. This is admitted by Ludendorff:—

"Thanks to their ample labour supply, the Entente had been in a position to furnish, not only the Verdun sector, but also a large portion of their front with all the means of communication and munitions necessary for an attack. It was, therefore,

possible for them in the shortest space of time, and at various parts of the front, to develop an offensive without betraying their plans by their preparations. The photographs of the enemy's field defences and works, and the continual checking and verification by new photographs secured by our aviators, could therefore only give general indications of his intended movements.

The French Front between Vailly on the Aisne and the Argonne was particularly well constructed, so that special preparations for attack were not necessary. We saw the works that were actually built south of the Chemin des Dames when we advanced in 1918. Their construction seems to have dated from 1915-1916. It is possible that the French had intended to make an offensive here in 1916, but were prevented by the German onslaught at Verdun.”\*

It is acknowledged that the ground thus added to the front which was to be attacked presented exceptional difficulties. It was a plateau which had natural advantages for the construction of a system of defences and the Germans had made the most of their opportunities and converted this high ground into a system of entrenchments which constituted the most formidable fortress on the whole front. But General Nivelle reckoned that even that fact in itself was an element in his favour when a surprise attack was contemplated. The German would not expect that an offensive would be launched on the strongest point in the whole line when there were so many more accessible points on either side. They would therefore take no special precautions either in the way of

\* “My War Memories,” General Ludendorff, Vol. II, p. 410.



strengthening the line at that point or of massing guns and reserves behind. The heights and the more formidable defence works could therefore be carried before the Germans could have time to construct a new defence system, or rally sufficient reserves for a counter-attack. That was Nivelle's expectation. But its realisation depended entirely on surprise.

The other element was time. The Germans were accustomed to the heavy-footed and clattering movements of Joffre and Haig—the long laborious and noisy preparations, whose rumble you could hear for leagues with a favourable wind. They knew that not a shot would be fired until the last shell had been pinnaced in the last dump, and the last duckboard had been nailed in the last line of approach. That always meant that the date of attacks was generally postponed and never anticipated, and that the Germans had ample warning and time to make their counter preparations. That is why the "set piece" always failed. The defence gained fourfold as much from time as did the attack. Nivelle was conscious of this. His last success was due to surprise. His next would be planned on the same idea. Had the Nivelle plan been carried out in its integrity, I still believe it would have been an immense success. At the projected date of his offensive there were only eight German divisions—including reserves—in and behind the lines he proposed to attack. At

*Fatal effect of postponement* the actual date of advance—about two months later—there were forty. Warning having been given, the Germans massed their reserves behind the point of anticipated attack. Having by that date completed their retirement to the Hindenburg line, they had by that means saved

*Time factor  
in Nivelle's  
plan*

several divisions, which they added to their reserves. They threw up fresh entrenchments behind their first system of defence at the point of expected attack. They also accumulated masses of guns and ammunition behind the threatened section. The delay transformed the whole character of the operation. The distinctive features of the Nivelle strategy gradually vanished, and the lumber of the Joffre-Haig military ideals was restored—only with a more difficult terrain substituted. The only point of removing the sphere of attack was not because the ground was more propitious, but because the onslaught if made at this point would not be expected by the enemy. Once that advantage was thrown away there were only two alternatives. One was to seek another terrain of attack on the Western Front. The other was to abandon altogether the idea of a great offensive this year in the France and Flanders areas and concentrate on another theatre or theatres of the War. The final and fatal error committed by France and Britain was not to decide upon one of these alternatives. The second course—a combined Allied offensive against Austria on the Italian Front—was suggested by three eminent French Generals, including General Pétain, but only after the British troops had already started their bombardment. That was one but not the only reason why the idea was not communicated to the British Government.

Who and what was responsible for the delay that wrecked the chances of success? It was largely due to the workings of a divided command.

*Responsibility for delay* This was my first effort to establish Unity of Command. It was resisted so viciously by Haig and Robertson that the delays caused by the time spent in allaying suspicions and

adjusting differences destroyed the effectiveness of the plan. After careful reconsideration of facts and documents it is not too much to say that had the two Allied Armies been as completely under the control of one *Generalissimo* as they became after the Beauvais decision in April, 1918, the Nivelle strategy, while it might not and probably would not have achieved a decision, would have secured a notable success. As it was, the Armies were never given a decent chance. The stubborn mind of Haig was transfixed on the Somme. When a change of terrain was suggested it took him a long time to extricate his mental top boots from the Somme mud. He always moved slowly and heavily when rapid and agile movement was essential. Weeks were wasted in unpleasant and nagging discussions as to the extension of the line to be held by British troops which was essential to the constitution of that mass of manoeuvre which was the main feature of the new plan. Then came long delays over questions of transport and co-ordination. A conference of Ministers and Generals had to be summoned to adjust the differences which had arisen on these points.

*Calais  
Conference on  
army transport*

It was held at Calais on the 26th February. *Twelve days before that date, according to the original plan, the attack was due to commence.* The German attack on Verdun had started a week earlier than it was due. That is why it was such a success in its initial stage. Joffre could not believe that armies were capable of moving at so early a date.

At the Calais Conference M. Briand and General Lyautey represented the French Government, and I myself attended on behalf of the British War Cabinet. General Nivelle was there to put his point of view, and Sir Douglas Haig came to present his case. Sir

William Robertson was also there as Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Transport occupied much of our time. The discussion reveals the kind of problem that was responsible for delay. The difficulty ought never to have been allowed to delay matters when time was so vital to success. The British Army demanded 250 trains—an addition of 120 trains over what had been already allocated to them. The French Railways could not spare more than 200 in all, and these with difficulty and only for a short period—for 15 days from 1st April, by the process of stopping supplies for the civilian population during that fortnight. As French Ministers pointed out,

*French protest  
at our demand  
for trains*

the British Army insisted upon twice as many locomotives and waggons as the French Army, and that for half the numbers of troops put into action. General Ragenau stated at Calais that he felt considerable surprise at the size and number of the trains required when compared with the demand of the French Armies, which were being prepared for similar operations. The French, whose striking force consisted of 70 divisions, only required 2,800 waggons a day for two groups of armies. But the requirements of the British striking force of little more than half the size was 8,000 waggons a day. He could not understand how it was that the British Army required so many more waggons, when the French effectives were so much greater.

General Nivelle agreed with General Ragenau. If all the operations were calculated on the same principles as those adopted by the British, no operation, he said, would be possible at all. He could not understand why so many trucks were required during the operation. If we did not succeed within fifteen days we should not continue our offensive.

If we failed we should stop. On the other hand, if we did succeed we should get into manœuvre warfare, and the mass of material required for trench warfare would be reduced. As General Officer responsible for the plan he engaged himself that fifteen days should suffice.

Neither Nivelle nor British Ministers were told that, as it turned out, these additional waggons and locomotives were not needed for the *Passchendaele* Nivelle plan, but were required to carry *the real culprit* out the elaborate preparations already being made to stage the tragedy of *Passchendaele*.

The difficulties created by Haig about taking up more of the line meant delay: discussions about locomotives and waggons were responsible for further delay. There were fresh difficulties in adjusting questions as to the supreme responsibility and direction for the plan of action, and for carrying it out during the course of the battle. Sir Douglas Haig was given the supreme command of the combined British and French troops in the arduous offensive at *Passchendaele*. But he and Robertson demurred at the idea of a United Command in the spring offensive. In all, three Conferences had to be held, two in London and one in Calais, before an agreement was reached on these questions.

At the Calais Conference on 26th and 27th February, held in consequence of these disputes days after the time originally fixed for the attack, a compromise was reached which was accepted and signed by both Commanders and also by Generals Lyautey and Robertson on behalf of their respective War Offices.

**AGREEMENT SIGNED AT ANGLO-FRENCH  
CONFERENCE HELD AT CALAIS  
26th and 27th February, 1917.**

1. The French War Committee and the British War Cabinet approve of the plan of operations on the Western Front as explained to them by General Nivelle and Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig on the 26th February, 1917.

*Terms of  
Calais  
agreement*

2. With the object of ensuring complete unity of command, during the forthcoming military operations referred to above, the French War Committee and the British War Cabinet have agreed to the following arrangements :—

(1) Whereas the primary object of the forthcoming military operations referred to in paragraph 1 is to drive the enemy from French soil, and whereas the French Army disposes of larger effectives than the British, the British War Cabinet recognises that the general direction of the campaign should be in the hands of the French Commander-in-Chief.

(2) With this object in view, the British War Cabinet engages itself to direct the Field-Marshal Commanding the British Expeditionary Force to conform his plans of operation to the general strategical plans of the Commander-in-Chief of the French Army.

(3) The British War Cabinet further engages itself to direct that during the period intervening between the date of the signature of this agreement and the date of the commencement of the operations referred to in paragraph 1, the Field-Marshal Commanding the British Expeditionary Force shall

conform his preparations to the views of the Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, except in so far as he considers that this would endanger the safety of his Army, or prejudice its success, and, in any case where Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig may feel bound on these grounds to depart from General Nivelle's instructions, he shall report the action taken together with the reasons for such action, to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, for the information of the British War Cabinet.

(4) The British War Cabinet further engages itself to instruct the Field-Marshal Commanding the British Expeditionary Force that, after the date of the commencement of the forthcoming operations referred to in paragraph 1, and up to the termination of these operations, he shall conform to the orders of the Commander-in-Chief of the French Army in all matters relating to the conduct of the operations, it being understood that the British Commander will be left free to choose the means he will employ, and the methods of utilising his troops in that sector of operations allotted to him by the French Commander-in-Chief in the original plan.

(5) The British War Cabinet and Government and the French Government, each so far as concerns its own Army, will be the judge of the date at which the operations referred to in paragraph 1 are to be considered as at an end. When so ended, the arrangement in force before the commencement of the operations will be established.

M. BRIAND

LYAUTEY

R. NIVELLE

D. LLOYD GEORGE

W. R. ROBERTSON, C.I.G.S.

D. HAIG, F.-M.

When this arrangement was concluded and signed, I thought all disagreement had now been removed and that after this Conference the two armies would move together as a united force. But you should never put too much trust in the agreements of stubborn men, especially if they think they have been done out of their rights. I ought not, therefore, to have been surprised when three days after the Calais agreement had been reached I received memoranda from both Sir William Robertson and Sir Douglas Haig protesting against the arrangement to which they had attached their signatures. Another Conference had to be summoned, this time in London, to re-bury the resurrected grievances which I thought had been honourably interred. By this time Haig and Robertson had worked themselves and each other into a condition of personal dislike of Nivelles, and I am afraid that dislike was reciprocated. It is easier to bury hatchets than hatreds, and old hatreds can always find new hatchets.

Sir William Robertson objected mainly on the ground that if unity of command were established for this battle it might serve as a precedent for future engagements in which both armies were involved. He was an obdurate opponent of the idea of a United Command, even for a single action in which both armies were involved, if the Supreme Command were vested in the French. As I have pointed out, the precedent was followed at Passchendaele. I naturally received no protest from Sir William Robertson then.

Sir Douglas Haig's was an elaborate document, suggesting all manner of difficulties as to the practical working of the arrangement, and proposing all kinds



of reservations and limitations upon General Nivelle's authority. All these questions ought to have been raised weeks ago and settled. It is right to say that some of the suspicions and apprehensions arrayed in these protests were provoked by a brusque and rather impertinent message sent to the British General from a member of the French Staff, couched in the tones of a peremptory order from a chief to a subordinate. This roused in Sir Douglas Haig's already suspicious breast all manner of forebodings as to the ulterior motives of the French Government and its Generals. He said amongst other things that he "had heard rumours before the Calais Conference of a desire in some quarters in France to gain practically complete control over the British Army and even to break up its unity and sandwich British units and formations between French troops under French control." As a matter of fact this was done in 1918 without presenting any practical difficulties or raising any questions of dignity and personal authority. French divisions were sandwiched in the north between English divisions, all being under the command of Sir Douglas Haig, and British divisions were sandwiched in the Soissons area between French divisions, under the command of General Pétain.

However, I did not apprehend any difficulty in overcoming the objections raised by Sir Douglas Haig. But Sir William Robertson went very much further and objected to the whole agreement on the ground of principle and precedent. Before the Calais Conference he made it clear that he deprecated the plan. At the Calais Conference which he attended he never uttered one word of protest. He confined

*Robertson's  
stand on  
principle*

his dissent to unutterable grunts and groans whenever Nivelle spoke. These inarticulate ejaculations provoked irrepressible merriment in Briand, who was in his most puckish mood. He was in one of those phases of gay detachment which were an infallible sign that he was tired of the whole business and meant soon to resign. This he did shortly afterwards.

Robertson said nothing to me either at the Conference or immediately after it was over. Some days afterwards came his written protest. It is worth quoting because it explains the attitude which he subsequently adopted in 1918 on this question and which led to his resignation :—

“ . . . It seemed to me that the principle adopted was a dangerous one, because it might prove to be the thin end of the wedge which the French have for long desired to obtain for bringing the British Armies in France under definite French control, and I suggested to the Prime Minister *that it would be difficult to justify departing from the principle once it is established, because if the arrangement made is the best for one battle, it can be argued that it will be best for all.* I also stated that our officers and men could not be expected to fight nearly as well under a foreign commander ; that the Dominion Governments might object ; and that entirely to entrust the fortunes of this great battle to a foreign commander, who as yet has had no opportunity of proving his fitness for the position, was a serious step, viewed from the standpoint of the Empire. I also mentioned the legal aspect of the case, which is that no British officer can be placed under the orders of any officer not holding His Majesty's Commission. This, however, may

be met by the phrase 'conform to the orders.'  
I do not know whether this 'is so or not. . . ."

He excused his assent to the Calais arrangement at the time on the plea that as far as he personally was concerned he had received no previous notification of what was contemplated. He, however, admitted that Sir Douglas Haig had informed him at Calais that he clearly understood the instructions of the War Cabinet regarding the forthcoming operations *as previously communicated to him* and that he would do his best to meet those instructions.

This unfortunate dispute necessitated another Conference, which was held on 12th and 13th March in London, three or four weeks after the date originally fixed for the attack. I made it clear in the course of the discussions that took place that the British War Cabinet resented the tone adopted in the documents sent from the French Headquarters to Sir Douglas Haig. Here is the Minute of my statement; I quote it as one illustration out of many of the support I invariably accorded to the Commander-in-Chief on all questions where his personal authority and prestige were concerned.

*March  
Conference in  
London*

"Mr. Lloyd George said that this was another point which had arisen in his discussions with the two Commanders-in-Chief. He had urged that, unless there was goodwill, any agreement would be a failure. He had pointed out that the two first documents sent by General Nivelle to Sir Douglas Haig, after the signature of the Calais Agreement, were couched in rather peremptory tones. As he

*My effort  
to compose  
the quarrel*

had expected, however, it had transpired that these letters were not written by General Nivelle himself, but by some subordinate. He had reminded General Nivelle that Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig's command extended over more than 1,500,000 men, and was the largest British Army by far that had ever existed. He had further pointed out that Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig possessed the full confidence of the War Cabinet, and was regarded with admiration in England, and, he believed, in France also. He had, therefore, told General Nivelle that, in his opinion, these two documents were somewhat brusque. General Nivelle, in reply, had stated that nothing was further from his mind than to show the smallest discourtesy to Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig. Mr. Lloyd George himself recognised that General Nivelle was the very last man to do anything discourteous, and everyone in England who had met him had been struck with his great courtesy. The point, therefore, which he wished to impress on the French Government was the danger that subordinate officials are sometimes indiscreet. He further wished to emphasise that it was not only the letter of the Agreement which was of importance, but equally the spirit in which it was carried out."

In the discussion which followed, General Lyautey said that before I wrote, he himself had observed that General Nivelle's communications had a somewhat brusque tone.

M. Thomas said that the whole of the French War Committee were agreed on this point.

General Lyautey said that he had suggested to

General Nivelle that he should not send any document to the British General Headquarters without making sure that it was drafted by an officer who was not only a good and competent officer, but one who was careful in the choice of his words in addressing the British Headquarters.

*Messages to  
be more care-  
fully drafted*

Admiral Lacaze said that what I had said corresponded entirely with the feeling of the French Ministers. For himself, he would like to add that either Commander-in-Chief, in the event of his receiving any document that was perhaps hastily drafted, and was couched in terms calculated to give offence, instead of remaining sullenly dissatisfied, should seek an early interview with the other Commander-in-Chief, in order to clear the matter up.

The Conference was attended by four French Ministers. After a good deal of palavering the trouble was once more arranged. Clumsy dispatches had been reproved and sore heads had been poulticed. As far as I know, there were no further personal embarrassments or misunderstandings in the way of effective co-operation between the two generals. But all this friction made for delay. It was common to both the Chantilly and the Nivelle plans that the Allies should be ready during the first fortnight in February. It was already the first fortnight in March and the Allied Commanders were still wrangling about preliminaries. During this period French Ministers and the French Military Chiefs were quite convinced that the British High Command and the British War Office were deliberately working against the successful achievement of the Nivelle plan. The latter, made no concealment of their dislike for the

*Agreement  
reached*

whole scheme. They preferred the old style offensive and they were still fretting about the brunt of the fighting and therefore the sacrifice being shifted from the British to the French Army. So thoroughly convinced was General Nivelle of this antagonism and of its being responsible for British tardiness, that he went to the extent of saying openly that the situation could not improve as long as Sir Douglas Haig remained in command of the British Army. This was conveyed to me indirectly. I promptly discouraged any such notion. But it shows something of the lack of sympathy between men on whose cordial and loyal co-operation so much depended.

*Nivelle's  
distrust  
of Haig*

We were not yet at the end of delays. This time the enemy was responsible. The enemy had decided to shorten their line in the Somme area. By doing so they gained three advantages. Their new position was considerably stronger than the old. They were also able to defend the new line with fewer troops and thus add several divisions to the reserve army they were building up behind the line in preparation for the offensive which they knew the Allies were contemplating. And thirdly, they dislocated the whole of the elaborate plans made by the Allied Generals just as they were being brought up to starting point.

*German retreat  
to Hindenburg  
line*

It is a reflexion on the French and British Staffs that the Germans were able to complete the tremendous arrangements necessary for such a withdrawal without any apprehension of the move on the part of their opponents.

The constant postponements had given the Germans ample opportunity to construct the Hindenburg line

and to carry out their scheme of retirement to it at their leisure. The operation was completed to the last detail without a hitch. Whether it ought not to have caused the abandonment of the Nivelle plan is an arguable question. It affected this new scheme in a much lesser degree than it would have affected the old plan for resumption of the Somme offensive. The German retreat involved the whole of that old battlefield. The ground given up by the enemy over which our troops would have to march with all their elaborate equipment was so completely cut up and devastated, in roads, bridges and rails, that it took weeks to re-establish effective contact. An attack on the Somme Front could not have materialised until the end of April.

About the middle of February an incident had occurred which gave the Germans a broad hint not only that an attack was contemplated, *Nivelle's plan captured by the Germans* but as to the area and time where the blow was to come. Here is Ludendorff's account of this strange accident—if accident it was :—

“In the middle of February, 1917, in order to improve its position, the Third Army had undertaken a local operation on the Champagne battlefields of September, 1915. This operation was successful. Amongst the captured material there was found an order of the 2nd French Infantry Division, dated 29th January, clearly pointing to a great French offensive on the Aisne for April. This gave us an extremely important clue. Little attention was now paid to rumours of attack in Lorraine and the Sundgau.”\*

\*“My War Memories,” General Ludendorff, Vol. II, p. 410.

That a document of so confidential and momentous a character should have been found lying about in a front trench within reach of the enemy, betrays such inconceivable carelessness that it is difficult to eliminate the idea of treachery. The point has never been cleared up, perhaps it never will be. Although the surprise attack on the right flank was not revealed, the incident apprising the Germans of the sector where the main attack was to be expected, turned out to be very detrimental to the chances of success.

*Was it  
treachery?*

The second incident came later, and was even more serious in its effects. It is established beyond doubt and is recorded by the French Commission of Inquiry appointed by the French War Cabinet after the battle to inquire into its advisability and the tactics adopted during the fight. The Report states:—

*Another  
similar  
incident*

“The secrecy of the operations was compromised by regrettable confidences and by the capture on a non-commissioned officer of an order fixing the operations of the third group of armies.”

This N.C.O. was taken prisoner by the Germans on the night of 4th April, and the document which he carried gave the order of battle of the troops north of the Aisne and the various corps objectives. Here the whole scheme was given away. It is significant that this kind of thing had never happened on either side before this offensive, and it is difficult to believe that it was altogether fortuitous. For some time French Generals and their Staffs had been conducting a bitter controversy amongst themselves as to the merits and demerits of the new plan. Before the

*Political strife  
invades French  
military staffs*



French Army attacked, there had been inside that army what one could call the Great River War, fought between the champions of the Somme offensive and the offensive of the Aisne. There was also much ill-feeling engendered by the promotion of General Nivelle to the High Command over the heads of distinguished and competent seniors. In the course of the internecine conflict between partisans of rival personalities and places, documents seem to have been freely and widely distributed by the excited combatants. The facility with which the most revealing of these secret papers found their way across the line gives rise to a feeling of suspicion which it is difficult altogether to suppress.

The Germans took the warning thus given and prepared to meet it.

Had the attack taken place at the date originally fixed, either the German raid would have been anticipated or the French attack, the preparation for which by then would have matured, could have been precipitated, so as to afford the enemy no time to adjust and speed up their defensive plans. They would have been still occupying their old positions on the Somme, and the divisions which they reckoned to save by the Hindenburg straightening out would have been still occupied in defending that useless line. There would have been no time to bring up divisions from Russia and Roumania. The tired-out divisions would not have been rested. The Russian Revolution would not yet have occurred, and picked divisions from the East could not therefore have been exchanged for tired divisions from the West.

Before the attack was launched, delays and warnings had already doomed it to failure—so much so

*Postponement  
of attack  
causes disaster*

that an effort was made by some of Nivelle's leading subordinates, including Pétain, Franchet d'Esperey and Micheler to induce the Commander-in-Chief to abandon it altogether, and think out an effective alternative. It is interesting, and not without consolation to those who have been persistently accused of the crime of amateur strategy, that the first and only alternative that occurred to these eminent Generals was an offensive on the Italian Front. M. Painlevé, who was then War Minister, has put it on record that Pétain, Franchet d'Esperey and Micheler were "unanimous in saying that if we did not attack, we must without delay send an army into the French Trentino." The reason why they did not suggest Italian offensive press this idea on the Government was that they had already committed the British Army to the Arras attack (in fact the British bombardment had already commenced). They could not then go back on their agreement with the British. It was too late now to reopen the question. Moreover they felt that French public opinion had for three months been led to expect great things from this offensive, and that the disappointment would be overwhelming if it were suddenly abandoned and the French attacking forces were whisked off to Italy.

It is a sad reflection that had the attack not been put off by difficulties, largely artificial, which genuine good-will would have dissolved, the Allied Armies would have caught the Germans in the act of "moving house" with all the traditional confusion attending that domestic migration. Long before the attack came the Germans had settled comfortably in their new quarters. Before the French attacked the enemy were fully apprised of the locality, direction and

weight of the Allied blow. As the preparations for the attack had ceased to have the character attached to surprise, they were given plenty of time to perfect theirs for defence. The "250 trains" spirit had supervened—slow, methodical and obvious. Time had been given to elaborate guarantees to allay Haig's suspicions as to the effect of Unity of Command on his authority—but time also had been vouchsafed the Germans to perfect their defence. By this time friend and foe alike knew all about the plan; the former gossiping about it, the latter preparing against it. The surprise had developed into the most elaborate and best advertised attack in the War.

*Nature of attack fully advertised*

The French themselves do not appear to have known at the time about the German capture of their plans in February. The second incident, on 4th April, of the betrayal of their complete plans was fully known to the French General Staff, but not a whisper reached the Cabinet, or for all I know, the British Staff, of the fact that the Germans were already in possession of the French plans. M. Painlevé stated that these momentous incidents, which ought to have constituted overruling considerations, were never revealed to the French Government until after the battle was fought. They changed the whole character of the operation, the success of which depended entirely on surprise. Nivelle was attacking the most formidable bastion on the German Front after the enemy had received ample and accurate knowledge of his intentions, and made the most effective arrangements to baffle them.

Joffre's plan avoided a direct attack on this fortress and proposed to pinch it out without direct assault by attacks on both flanks. Nivelle's idea was that

the Germans would never expect a frontal advance on so formidable a position, and would therefore place their reserves opposite more vulnerable sectors of their line. The progress made, even in an attack which had been anticipated and provided against for two months, proved that Nivelle's calculation was not altogether ill-founded. Had this stronghold been captured, Laon was within Nivelle's grasp and the German line would have at last been turned. But

*Why did  
Nivelle  
persist?*

what possessed him to persist after the secret had been given away, and the element of surprise upon which he relied had completely disappeared? There is but one answer. These great offensives, once they fired the imagination of a Commander, ceased to be plans for the winning of victory. They became a passion which could not be resisted. Like all passions which possess men, this one banished caution, prudence and fear. The more Joffre, Nivelle and Haig were criticised and opposed, the more fierce became their appetite for their cherished plans. They ignored difficulties, they concealed and suppressed disagreeable facts, even from themselves. We shall see this dementation once more at work when Passchendaele is reached in the course of my narrative. The plan becomes an intoxication and the intoxication a delirium. When the craving is on him the planomaniac is blind. General Nivelle in December was a cool and competent

*A gambler's  
plunge*

planner. By April he had become a crazy plunger. We have witnessed this process many a time among erring business men who, in a successful, honourable career, have won repute for circumspection and prudence. If they are confronted with an unexpected check in

a well-thought-out scheme from which they have a right to anticipate much gain, they suddenly lose control, throw accumulated wisdom to the winds, and decide to smash through without weighing the hazards. Many an established fortune has been squandered and many a respected character has been ruined in that way.

There was the knowledge that the Germans knew his plans—that they were proposing to thwart them—that the Russian Revolution had released

*Facts Nivelle  
ignored*

many of their best reserves in the East, and that they had been added to the reserves which were to counter the French "surprise." These facts, known to him and urged upon him by the ablest of his lieutenants, do not seem to have weighed in the estimation of a hair with this General, stimulated to a pitch of infatuation by constant dram drinking from the inexhaustible puncheons of anticipated victory. He was in a state of inebriated exaltation which destroyed his wonted poise. The quiet, modest man became garrulous, boastful and truculent. This state of mind accounts for most of the silly offensives of the War, and especially for the way in which Generals persisted in them after their failure had become evident to every uncommitted, sane onlooker.

As arranged, the British attack came first. It was preceded by a prolonged bombardment which lasted five days. The infantry attacked on the 9th April. In its initial stages the on-slaught was a brilliant success. The

*British take  
Vimy Ridge*

Vimy Ridge was captured, the German defences were broken through on a front of 18 kilometres to a depth of six kilometres, 12,000 prisoners and 150 guns were captured, and we have no less authority than that of General Ludendorff, who was

in command of the German Army, for saying that the situation at the end of the first day was extremely critical "and might have had serious consequences if the enemy had pushed further forward." His further comments on the victory won by the British forces on 9th April are worth quoting by way of showing how near we were to achieving a result which, if

*Ludendorff's account of our failure to exploit success* not decisive, would at least have involved a rolling up of the German Army to a line far behind that which they held on the morning of the battle.

"The Battle of Arras on 9th April was a bad beginning for the decisive struggle of this year.

10th April and the following days were critical. The consequences of a break-through of 12 to 15 kilometres wide and 6 or more kilometres deep are not easy to meet. In view of the heavy losses in men, guns and ammunition resulting from such a break-through, colossal efforts are needed to make good the damage. It was the business of G.H.Q. to provide reserves on a large scale. But it was absolutely impossible, with the troops at our disposal and in view of the military situation, to have a second division immediately behind every division that might possibly fall out. A day like 9th April threw all calculations to the winds. Many days had to pass before a new line could really be formed and consolidated. The end of the crisis, even if the troops were available, depended very largely, as it generally does in such cases, on whether the enemy, after his first victory would attack again, and by further success aggravate the difficulty of forming a new line. Our position having been weakened, such victories were to be won only too easily. The

British attacked again at the same spot from the 10th onwards in great strength, but not really on a grand scale.”\*

The capture of the French document disclosing the Nivelle objective on the Aisne had helped the British Army, for it induced the Germans to concentrate their reserves behind the Chemin des Dames. We were therefore able not only to break the German line but at one point to advance six miles. One officer told me that he marched with his company a quarter of a mile beyond the point at which his battalion was ordered to stop, but found no Germans except a few stragglers who surrendered without a struggle. The following day that evacuated ground was reoccupied by the enemy. The failure to press the attack home with the whole strength of the British forces was probably due to the cavalry obsession which pervaded the hearts as well as the minds of the horse soldiers who commanded the British Army in campaigns where engineering, artillery and infantry tactics meant everything and cavalry charges worse than nothing. Thousands upon thousands of horsemen were assembled at a convenient point behind the line ready to dash through the rent in the German Front. Nothing came of it except the death gallop of Monchy, where horses and horsemen were mown down by a few machine-gunners as soon as they came within range. Infantry had to be called in to capture the village. Cavalry were only an impediment in the advance. They postponed appropriate measures until it was too late to use them. With cavalry the policy of

*Our cavalry  
obsession  
responsible*

\* “My War Memories,” General Ludendorff, Vol. II, pp. 421-422.

This expression of the German view of the first day's fighting at Arras is confirmed by General von Hindenburg, *vide* Appendix at end of chapter, p. 1530.

"infiltration" which the Germans used so effectively in March, 1918, was impossible. By that policy, if at one point the opposing line held out, at another it might give way. The Germans with their machine-guns pressed onward where there was an opening. They surrounded the men who held out and forced them either to retreat or to surrender. But cavalry must have a gap wide enough to charge through in masses that will bear down all resistance. The Australian History gives an account of how the Australians, eager to attack the surprised German Army on the right, were kept back for days because no gap had yet been made for the cavalry to get through. When they were allowed to advance the German reserves had arrived, the German resistance had stiffened, and the German line of defence was restored. Hence the bloody and futile attacks on Bullecourt. They ultimately, with infinite courage and tenacity, captured a miserable ruin and created one more salient, but gained no tactical advantage of any sort or kind. A great opportunity was thrown away of winning a reeling and resounding victory which might easily have produced considerable results by compelling the Germans to weaken still further their reserves on the Aisne. As a result of this failure to take full advantage of an opportunity which had been created by the dash and valour of our troops and the negligence of our foes, the Germans found it unnecessary to carry out the operation which at one moment on the 9th they had contemplated—withdrawal to the Wotan position several miles behind their original lines. That was a position which at that date was still under construction and incomplete, and might therefore have been captured in the rout, as our

*Germans nearly  
forced to  
big retreat*



defences in front of Amiens were overrun in the debacle of March, 1918. As it was, the Germans were given plenty of time to rally and to throw in their reserves. By means of counter-offensives they were able to consolidate their defence without very much more loss of ground.

The battle then resolved itself into a series of attacks and counter-attacks on isolated villages and posts—futile and bloody.

On 16th April the French launched their great attack on the plateau above the Aisne. Was it a victory or a defeat? The Germans have no doubt that it was for them a victory. There were many Generals and politicians amongst the Allies who took their view.

On the other hand there were distinguished Generals not in the least implicated in the strategy or tactics of the battle, who regarded it as a qualified success. The result is thus summarised by Foch, Gouraud, and Bruyère, who had been appointed by the French Chamber to enquire into the circumstances of the fight and its conduct :—

“ It was a success but not a breaking through. . . . ”

*Verdict of French Committee of Enquiry* “ To sum up : from 17th to 23rd April, the date at which the investigations of the Commission have to stop, General Nivelle abandoned all idea of breaking through rapidly and violently towards Laon and confined his objective in that direction to the capture of the ridge of the Dames.

All the steps he took were directed to clearing Reims from the enemy, a result which he tried to obtain by joint attacks of the IVth and the Vth

**Armies.** The former was to endeavour by a series of successive efforts to push forward towards the North across the massif of Moronvillers. The latter was to try to advance towards the N.E. after first seizing all the heights of Brimont Spin and Sapegneuil. The battle, of which the object was to break through the enemy's lines, gradually assumed the character of a battle of long duration with the object of using up the enemy's troops. This process developed rapidly in the enemy's ranks. On the 1st April the enemy had on the Western Front 50 fresh divisions in reserve, i.e. a third of his total forces on that front. By the end of April all these reserves had been absorbed. He was compelled to draw upon quiet sectors of the front to maintain the fight. At first the divisions withdrawn from the front lines could have some days' rest before returning to their sectors. Soon this was no longer possible. The process of exhaustion quickened at a rate impossible to believe. The remnants of the troops brought back from the front line were thrown directly into quiet sectors such as the Argonne or the heights of the Marne. It is thus that the second division of the Guards, which had been cut up at Harazoe from the 5th to the 16th May, as well as the 28th Division, are identified on the 25th at the hill of the Talon.

The only rest these divisions enjoyed was the time occupied in moving from one place to another.

On the English Front the same results were observed."

It all sounds very much like the official explanation for the failure of Passchendaele. There was no break through, but part of a desirable ridge was captured

and for the rest the enemy divisions had been used up.

The conditions under which the final arrangements for the attack were completed, and the atmosphere in which it was launched, were not conducive to that composure and concentration which are essential in the execution of a critical enterprise.

The view taken by the French Government of the progress and results of the Nivelle offensive was not formally communicated to the British Government. But information percolated through as to the atmosphere of dubiety that was thickening around the offensive.

*Findings not  
communicated  
to British  
Government*

During the progress of the fight the British War Cabinet took note of the situation. On 16th April I informed the War Cabinet that I had heard from M. Thomas some further details of the attitude recently assumed by the French Government towards General Nivelle. This was supplemented by information furnished by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. It appeared that General Nivelle had summoned a meeting of his Army commanders, at which his plan of operations for the future had been criticised by General Pétain, who, though his senior in service, was now subordinate to him. As a result of what occurred, General Pétain communicated direct with the French War Cabinet, and General Nivelle was summoned to a Conference, at which he refused to explain or justify his plan before one of his own subordinates. After this certain French Ministers had proceeded to the French Front to discuss the situation.

*Dispute  
between  
Pétain and  
Nivelle*

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff pointed out to the Cabinet that, after having approved the

plan adopted by the French Commander-in-Chief in its initial stage, the French Government had proceeded to throw doubt on its soundness, though nothing had occurred in between to justify this change of attitude, and that such conduct was hardly fair to the man who had to execute the operations.

I said that I was of opinion that it must have been difficult for the French Government to ignore any arguments put before them by an officer of such high position as General Pétain.

It was no doubt very disconcerting for a General on the eve of a great attack to have conclaves of politicians and of subordinate generals challenging, questioning and doubting his dispositions. Sometimes the debates were held at General Nivelle's Headquarters, sometimes he was hiked off to Paris, to explain and defend his dispositions. Not only must it have rattled the Commander-in-Chief, but it must also have had the effect of unnerving all the Generals who were to take part in the attack, and the atmosphere of distraction and divided counsel must have spread far and wide amongst those who had the responsibility for leading the attack on strongly entrenched positions.

The battle was viewed by a delegation of Members from the French Parliament, and there is no doubt that the break-off, which was the consequence of the failure to break through, was attributable to their intervention. Some of the horrors inseparable from a great battle were witnessed by them and excited them to a wail of exaggeration as to the numbers of the fallen.

*Intervention  
of French  
politicians*

The Generals appointed by the French Govern-

ment to enquire into the battle summarised their view of what had been achieved by the combined attack which constituted the Nivelle scheme in the following words :—

“ However this may be, if the offensive was far from obtaining the results hoped for, it is none the less true that it constituted a real success for our armies. Under the menace of its preparation the enemy refused to fight on a portion of his front and had evacuated 2,000 square kilometres of ground, thus setting free one-eighth part of the invaded territory. As for the attack itself, it had procured 55,000 prisoners, 800 guns, and 1,000 mitrailleuses.

Apart from this result as regards material, thanks to the rapid using up of the enemy's reserves, it cleared the Italian Front in the Trentino, got rid of all danger from the Russian Front and gave the initiative in the operations into our hands.”

The French members had exaggerated very considerably the casualties sustained by the French Army. These extravagant estimates were commented upon very adversely by the French Committee of Enquiry, and in dealing with the question of casualties they say :—

“ As for the losses themselves which public opinion spoke of as particularly heavy, they did not exceed those which had occurred in previous great battles. The battle of April, 1917, may be compared to the battle in Champagne in September, 1915. The object of both was to

pierce the enemy's front. Now the losses in Champagne in September, 1915, on a front of 40 kilometres were 125,000. Those on the Aisne during a similar period on a front of 80 kilometres did not exceed 117,000 men."\*

"To understand the bearing of the advantages that it produced, it is enough to recall the impressions which would have been produced in France if the same result had been gained by our adversary. It is easy to imagine the tone of triumph which would have been adopted in their *communiqués*, all Germany would have been beflagged."

This report came too late to dissipate rumours which had been partly due to the Lobby gossip set going and stimulated by the excitable Deputies who had viewed the battle. Rumour doubled and even trebled the actual casualty figures, and the popular imagination was staggered by the reports that were circulated. The revulsion of feeling was all the greater because of the altitude of hope from which France had been flung into despond by this shock.

When Nivelle succeeded Joffre, as I have already pointed out, every Frenchman, soldier and civilian, said, "Here is something different at last." When they discovered that they had only substituted King Cormorant for King Stork, despair kindled into anger and anger into mutiny in trench and Parliament.

*Revulsion of  
feeling in  
France*

\* A similar contrast might have been drawn between the losses and gains of this battle and that of the Somme, much to the advantage of the Nivelle offensive.

The Committee proceed to cast discredit upon the efforts made by General Nivelle's enemies to treat the Battle of the Chemin des Dames as if it were a great defeat.

Rumours that had been disseminated amongst the civilian population behind the lines soon spread into the camps where soldiers were awaiting their time to be flung into the shambles. The result was widespread disaffection, and here and there mutiny amongst the troops which at one time

*Mutiny  
breaks out*

was so serious as to threaten revolution. The French Chamber was in revolt against the High Command. The French Government demanded the resignation of General Nivelle. General Pétain was appointed in his place. He was specially qualified to deal with the situation. He was a man of great calm and common sense, and it was probably known by this time throughout the Army that he was opposed to the attack which had miscarried with such heavy losses. The French soldiers knew, therefore, that General Pétain's appointment was a guarantee that there would be no more of these sanguinary offensives which for three years had so recklessly squandered the youth of France in experiments or schemes prepared by Staffs, most of whom had never seen any actual fighting in or over the trenches.

Pétain's tact, judgment, and firmness re-established confidence in the armies of France. But it meant that for attack on any considerable scale these armies had ceased at any rate for a whole year to be an effective fighting machine.

*Pétain  
re-establishes  
confidence*

*Appendix (see p. 1521).* "The English attack at Arras on 9th April, 1917, swept over our first three lines. The evening report revealed a dark picture. A ray appeared. The English did not know how to exploit the success to the full. A piece of luck, as so often before. I pressed the hand of my Quartermaster-General with the words, 'We have lived through more critical times.'"

Field-Marshal von Hindenburg.

## CHAPTER LI

### SEQUEL TO NIVELLE OFFENSIVE

To clear up the doubt that existed in the minds of our Commander-in-Chief and C.I.G.S. as to French intentions, it was finally decided at the end of April that a Conference should be held in Paris at which the political and military Chiefs should be present. It was fixed for 4th May. On the 1st May the Imperial War Cabinet considered very carefully the line which the British representatives should take at the Conference. Some days before the meeting General Smuts paid a special visit to Headquarters in France in order to ascertain the exact position. Sir Douglas Haig seems to have taken advantage of the visit to impress upon General Smuts the importance of an offensive to clear the Flanders coast. He came back full of the idea. At my request, he put the whole of his views upon the military situation into writing. As the document is an interesting survey of the position as it appeared at that time to a competent and independent observer, it is worth quoting literally the views he expressed.



† SEQUEL TO NIVELLE OFFENSIVE 1531  
**THE GENERAL STRATEGIC AND MILITARY SITUATION**  
**AND**  
**PARTICULARLY THAT ON THE WESTERN FRONT**

**1. General.**

The present strategic and military situation is determined not only by the previous course of the War but to a large extent also by our *His report on the military situation* conception of general policy, by the political aims we are fighting for, and the possibility of vigorously defining and limiting those aims.

A military situation which is hopeless in view of a large and ambitious political programme may yet be quite hopeful and reassuring if that programme is severely cut down to the essential minimum of our war aims and of the victory we consider necessary to realise them. Such a definition and limitation of our war aims has now become quite necessary at this very late stage of this long and exhausting struggle and has been carried out by two committees of the War Cabinet. Apart from the subsidiary recommendations of those committees our war aims are now limited to the following four :—

(a) Destruction of the German colonial system with a view to the future security of all communications vital to the British Empire.

*Our War aims defined* This has already been done—an achievement of enormous value which ought not to be endangered at the peace negotiations.

(b) Tearing off from the Turkish Empire all parts that may afford Germany opportunity of

expansion to the Far East and of endangering our position as an Asiatic Power. This has essentially been achieved, although the additional conquest of Palestine may be necessary to complete this task.

(c) Evacuation by the enemy of Belgium, Northern France, Serbia, Montenegro, and Roumania, and compensation to Belgium and perhaps France and Serbia.

(d) A settlement of Europe which will limit or destroy the military predominance of the Germanic powers, though the actual details of such a settlement may be left open for the peace conference.

The last two aims have still to be achieved. The net result of the War so far may be stated as follows : while all other parties have been heavy losers in territory both the German and the British Empires have been winners, the one in Central Europe, the other over the rest of the globe. While our gains have immensely strengthened our position the risk remains that the German Empire may have gained even more relatively and, unless defeated now, will become again at some future date an even more serious menace to us than it has been in the past. How has this defeat to be brought about ?

*Defeat of  
Germany  
essential*

I have already told the War Cabinet and I repeat here my frank opinion that that will not be merely or even entirely a military defeat. A certain substantial measure of military success will be necessary and must be achieved not only because it is necessary for our ends but also as a lasting lesson to Prussian militarism.

But greater forces are fighting for us than our armies. This War will be settled largely by the imponderables—by the forces of public opinion all over the world which have been mobilised by German outrages, by fear on the part of the governing classes of Central Europe of the dark forces of revolution already gathering in the background, by the gaunt spectre of want or even starvation already stalking through the land : and by all those consequential factors of morals to which even Napoleon attached more military importance than to the prowess of his armies. Thus the present impotence of the Russian Army is almost balanced and in the end may be more than balanced by the dread which this example of successful revolution is inspiring in the rulers of Central Europe. And the coming in of even pacific America shows the growing force of the imponderables set free by this War in the minds of the nation.

In this connection two considerations cannot be too clearly realised by us. First, that in our diplomacy and our conduct of the War we should ever strive to keep this world opinion on our side and not be deflected by German methods of barbarism or in any other way from our true course. This affects such questions as the severer forms of reprisals, our coercion of small neutral nations, and even an added emphasis to our traditional generous policy in purely domestic affairs, and similar questions. Second, that the imponderables will continue to act beyond the duration of this War and produce greater changes than any which we will be able to achieve or even contemplate in

the peace treaty. It appears now fairly probable that the democratisation of Central Europe, which will be an inevitable consequence of this War, will go further to achieve our war aim (d) than any measures we could devise. But, even so, a substantial measure of military success will be necessary for the attainment of our ends (c) and (d). How is this to be achieved? And this brings me to the consideration of the present strategic and military situation.

## 2. Salonika.

*In this connection the dominant fact that emerges is that our scope for military operations has become considerably narrowed down as the War has progressed. Possibilities of offensive action which at earlier stages of the War were open to us are no longer possible and several brilliant ideas will not now be put to the test of trial. On the contrary even our present fields of operation may have to be revised and contracted. The warnings of the First Sea Lord as to the naval and shipping position have become so grave and insistent that it would be dangerous in the extreme to continue to ignore them indefinitely. The question therefore arises, which of our overseas campaigns is the least promising to the attainment of our ends and makes the heaviest demands on our shipping. This undoubtedly is the Salonika campaign, which has failed in its original intention, and will more and more become not only a military and naval but possibly also a political embarrassment. Apart from a victorious offensive which may seriously threaten Sofia I can only see two advantages arising from*

*Limited scope for military action*

*Should Salonika be abandoned?*

this campaign : (a) it may support our diplomacy in endeavouring to detach Bulgaria from the Central Powers, (b) it may serve as a cover to Greece and prevent the Germans from reaching it and gathering fresh resources in men and submarine bases and lairs on the Greek coast and islands.

With our present forces on that front I consider a real threat to Bulgaria out of the question. The strategic geographical position in Central Europe is such that the Balkan Front should either be one of our most formidable in men and guns or should be left alone altogether. Any middle course such as we have adopted is either futile or dangerous. . . .

The question for immediate consideration of the Foreign Office is whether the detachment of Bulgaria is possible : if it can be and is brought about the Salonika campaign would not remain as a further addition to our list of failures. And a Bulgaria which is not only powerful and nationally satisfied but which has played Germany false at the most critical stage of the War will be a great factor in the future settlement of the Balkans, quite apart from the immediate military advantages. If possible the effort should be made. If not, then I can only advise a change of our plans, and our retirement from this front in such stages as will not endanger the position of our Allies who will remain on the contracted front. The Balkan situation has now become primarily a diplomatic one, and our military policy should be revised accordingly.

Next in importance to the detachment of Bulgaria from Central Europe would be the detachment of Turkey which might become feasible if the Russian Government would definitely waive their rights

under the Bosphorus agreement. The danger, however, of Russia going out of the War on some pretext or other is so serious and would have such far-reaching consequences that I do not think we should moot the question with her at present, but leave the situation to clear up of itself in the course of events. Nagging is the worst form of dealing with a patient. I therefore proceed on the assumption that our campaign against the Turkish Empire will continue in full vigour.

*Possibilities of  
attacks on  
Turkey*

### 3. *Mesopotamia.*

As regards Mesopotamia, we have achieved all that we were aiming at and can now consolidate our position and make it impregnable to any future counter-attacks. General Maude should at the most convenient point on this front select and prepare a strong defensive position for any future emergency, while continuing the pressure against the enemy further afield. . . .

### 4. *Palestine.*

This Palestine campaign presents very interesting military and even political possibilities. As it progresses to Jerusalem and Damascus, it will threaten the Turkish Empire far more gravely than anything we have so far undertaken except the Dardanelles and Gallipoli campaign. We should therefore be prepared for the most obstinate resistance, and it is essential for us to contemplate the gradual but complete withdrawal of our forces from Salonika to this front. This transfer will also have the effect of our making less use of the dangerous Mediterranean for our overseas

## SEQUEL TO NEVELLE OFFENSIVE 1557

operations, as the Palestine Army could be largely supplied from the East, Australia, and South Africa, and the ships now used in East Africa will also soon be set free for this purpose. The contraction of the Salonika Front and the increasing pressure in Palestine must obviously have the effect of bringing the whole of the Turkish forces to the Asiatic fronts of the Turkish Empire. It must be clearly realised that unless the Russians are made to pull their full weight in Armenia and General Maude continues to threaten the enemy on his front the Palestine force is certain to meet with the most formidable opposition even before it reaches Jerusalem. In any case, if we adopt a vigorous offensive we must be prepared to face the fact that this front will in all probability assume an importance eventually second only to that of the Western Front. The coming campaign must be judged and appreciated from that point of view to prevent future surprises or disappointments.

### 5. *Western Front.*

THERE REMAINS FOR CONSIDERATION THE FAR MORE IMPORTANT AND COMPLICATED QUESTION OF THE WESTERN FRONT. I HAVE ALWAYS LOOKED UPON IT AS A MISFORTUNE, NO DOUBT INEVITABLE UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES, THAT THE BRITISH FORCES HAVE BECOME SO ENTIRELY ABSORBED BY THIS FRONT. THE RESULT NOW IS THAT IN A THEATRE MAINLY OF THE ENEMY'S CHOOSING, THE TWO MOST IMPORTANT ARMIES OF THE ENTENTE ARE LOCKED UP IN FRONT OF ALMOST IMPREGNABLE POSITIONS. It is essential to our ends that we should keep the initiative and offensive, but both

*Deadlock  
in the West*

are enormously difficult in the situation in which we are placed on this front. I have no confidence that we can break through the enemy line on any large scale. No doubt with our predominance of heavy artillery we can batter in any selected portion of the enemy line, but in every case so far we have been unable to advance for more than a comparatively short distance, and there is no reason to think that this state of affairs will materially alter in the near future unless some unforeseen calamity overtakes the enemy. I found the spirit of both our officers and men on this front magnificent in its confidence and determination. But my visit has only strengthened my impression that a decision on this front can only be reached by a process of remorselessly wearing down the enemy. And that is a very slow, costly and even dangerous process for us no less than for the enemy and threatening both with exhaustion of man-power as the process of attrition goes on. Victory in this kind of warfare is the costliest possible to the victor.

My visit to this front has also impressed me with the undesirability of the present position both as regards the supreme military direction and the state of our strategic reserves. On both these points I wrote my views immediately after my return to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and they have been largely incorporated into his important memorandum of 17th April to the War Cabinet (O.I.-95/274) which has no doubt received the most careful consideration. These views I shall briefly repeat here :—

We entered the War in a very small way with



a small military force and not as a principal combatant but rather as an auxiliary to France. This fact was reflected in our general military policy, which was of necessity one of great modesty and almost complete subordination to that of France. Our Army took its position side by side with the French Army in defence of French soil, and as our forces continued to grow, we proceeded to take over more and more of the French line. The modesty of our policy and the subordination of our role to that of France have continued notwithstanding the fact that during the last two years the whole situation has been transformed and we are now the principal opponent of the Central Empires and the financial, naval and, to a large extent, the military mainstay of the Entente. This anomalous situation is now reflected in three curious respects. . . .

The most serious result of all is that our whole Army (with the exception of the Forces conducting campaigns elsewhere) has been locked up on the Western Front and we have no great strategic reserve left for any unforeseen contingencies. For no doubt good and sufficient reasons we have gradually shouldered more and more of the burden of defending France and so both the French and English Armies have become pinned down along the present Western Front. The Germans probably have great reserve forces which they could fling either against one of the existing fronts or into some new diversion into which they may be driven in order to achieve success. . . .

I consider the time has come for us to aim resolutely at the removal of these three anomalies. We should endeavour to recover the diplomatic lead, especially in the Balkans ; we should, after the present offensive, resume the independence of our military direction ; and, above all, we should aim at the liberation from the Western Front at an early date of at least one of our armies, which should remain in the north of France or the neighbourhood of the Belgian border as a strategic reserve to be used only when necessary in the case of grave contingencies. A great force such as ours, which has no strategic reserve, is running grave risks. The German strategic reserve last December could deal with Roumania as soon as the danger of her invading Transylvania arose, and we should be in a similar position of security against unforeseen developments.

These impressions which I brought from the Front have since been reinforced by the rumour that several important members of the French Government do not approve of General Nivelle's present offensive and consider a defensive policy the wisest one for the French Army to pursue. If this policy is carried out and is applied also to the British Army, it means that, towards the end of the third year of the War, the enemy has still succeeded in reducing us to the defensive. This, coupled with the fact that the enemy forces are now more numerous than ever before, that they have conquered large parts of Entente territory, which they are still holding, and that the submarine campaign, already so grave, is growing in violence, would look very much like our defeat, would dishearten

*French  
adopting a  
defensive policy*

all the Entente nations whose discouragement might precipitate serious peace movements among one or more of them. And once the rot sets in it might be difficult to stop it. No doubt the weight of America would be felt in 1918, but the danger is that we may not get there, unless active operations are presented and a continuance of military success buoys up the spirit of the nations to fight on till America can come in as a decisive factor. I feel the danger of a purely defensive policy so gravely that I would make the following suggestions in case the French carry out such a policy. In that case we should make them take back a substantial part of their line now occupied by us. As they would require no great reserve for offensive purposes, they would be in a position to do so. Our forces should then be concentrated towards the north, and part should go to the rear as a strategic reserve, while the rest should endeavour to recover the northern coast of Belgium and drive the enemy from Zeebrugge and Ostend. This task will be most formidable, especially if both the Russian and French lines remain passive, and every pressure should be exerted to induce them to be as aggressive as possible, even if they cannot actually assume the offensive. But, however difficult the task, something will have to be done to continue our offensive, and I see more advantages in an offensive intended to recover the Belgian coast and deprive the enemy of two advanced submarine bases, than in the present offensive, which in proportion as it succeeds in driving the enemy out of France will make the French less eager to continue the struggle beyond

*Flanders  
offensive urged*

the goal. If the French are determined to go on the defensive, our (British) task on the Western Front may become so difficult that the Cabinet may decide to abandon the further prosecution of the Palestine campaign and to bring our Salonika troops as reinforcements to our Western Front.

I mention this here because I consider the time is now rapidly approaching when the military situation as a whole will have to be most carefully reviewed by the War Cabinet and circumstances may force them to contract their military fronts even more than was above suggested. We are approaching the final stage of this long-drawn-out struggle, when we cannot afford to make any more mistakes, and when any false move made by either side may well prove decisive and fatal to it.

#### *6. Contingencies.*

All this is the reason why I am anxious to see a proper strategic reserve established. The chapter of accidents in war is a long and curious one, and many a struggle has been settled by something unforeseen happening near the end. We want a reserve force to provide against surprises and accidents and also to be in a position to make use of any good opportunity which may present itself for offensive action on our part. . . .

#### *7. Review of policy necessary.*

The point I would emphasise finally for the attention of the War Cabinet is that the time has come, or is coming soon, when the strategic situation, both military and naval, in relation to our resources and diplomacy, should be reviewed as a whole, and, so far as is possible, a definite policy should be laid down on the points raised in this memorandum as well as on others which I have refrained from

referring to. Unless the First Sea Lord and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff have the clear guidance of the War Cabinet on general questions of policy, it is impossible for them to obtain the highest and most efficient power out of the war machine they are directing.

29th April, 1917.

J. C. S."

Sir William Robertson sent in to the War Cabinet his comment upon the Smuts document :

*Robertson's  
note on the  
Smuts  
Memorandum*

# "OPERATIONS ON WEST FRONT

1. The French Government is apparently unwilling to continue serious offensive operations. This, if true, means a drastic change in the military situation. Local offensive operations, which the French are said to be contemplating will have no real effect. In war there is no half-way house between fighting a battle through with the determination to beat the enemy, and acting defensively. Such phrases as ' active defensive ' and ' offensive defensive ' are mere words without any meaning in practice.

*Perils of  
French  
inaction*

2. If the French stop now and once get away from the idea of heavy fighting and heavy losses, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to persuade them to undertake a big offensive again. At the best the stop may mean that they will not begin again till the spring of 1918, as, until the arrival of an American Army in France, there is no reason to suppose that the Allies will be in a better position to fight on the Western Front than they are now.

3. The advantages which the French may claim for inaction are : Germany may be starved out

(which we certainly cannot rely upon, especially as she already has Roumania to draw upon and may later have Russia); loss of life will be less and therefore the policy of less fighting, will be popular in France (this being the most futile of all arguments); America may help with troops. But is it certain that shipping can be found in nine to twelve months' time for the transport of, say, 500,000 Americans to France and maintain them there? \* Is it certain that our own shipping will hold out for another year, and that the French and British peoples will stand the strain of a year of inactivity while they have to endure continually increasing privations?

4. Can we be sure of keeping Russia and Italy in the War if Germany is free to strike hard at them? At the present time Russia is an easy prey, and cannot stand up to a formidable attack. What will be the attitude of the new Russian Government to us if we allow their country to be overrun once more? The Italian danger is notorious and nothing more need be said about it.

5. The above are briefly the dangers of inaction. What are the advantages of continuing the battle?

In every great battle a time of extreme stress arrives and the side which sets its teeth the hardest usually wins.

Again, before any considerable success can be gained in battle the enemy's reserves have to be exhausted. This used to be a matter of hours, now is a matter of weeks and months. The Commander with the last reserves usually wins.

\* Britain alone found shipping to convey a million American troops to France in 1918. American ships carried another million.

When General Nivelle's plan was presented to the War Cabinet I said I did not believe in an early break-through such as he anticipated. I never have believed in a break-through of that kind, nor is an absolute break-through necessarily a preliminary to satisfactory terms of peace. If we sufficiently exhaust the enemy's reserves we may hope to attain such a measure of success as will persuade him that worse things are in store for him and that it is useless to continue the struggle.

6. *In the present battle we have done more than we expected (e.g. captured about 250 guns) and if the French have not done what they expected it is chiefly because their hopes were foolishly extravagant. They have not gained much ground, but between us we have made a much bigger hole in the German reserves than we thought was possible in the time. Out of 49 divisions originally available, 20 have been drawn into the fight on the French Front and 16 on ours. The fighting, though undoubtedly very heavy, is going slowly and steadily in our favour, and if the enemy were pushing us back every day and had already taken over 40,000 prisoners and 400 guns, I think we should not be without anxiety. Nor is he, as is shown by information received from Germany and the tone of recent German communiqués. For the first time in the*

*Time on the side of Germany* War Germany is faced with really serious labour troubles at home. General Groener's proclamation (Sir

W. Townley's telegram of 27th April) is clear evidence of this. Germany's plan is quite obviously to act defensively in the West and hold us up until her submarine campaign has had time to take effect. She is hopeful that this will happen before next harvest, for in the interval between this and then the privations of her people will be

severe. If we can add anxiety regarding the military situation to anxiety as to food, we may bring her to terms. We are making her fight against her wishes, and that of itself justifies continued prosecution of the offensive.

On the other hand, if we, by our inaction, leave her free to win easy successes on fronts other than the Western, and allow her to proclaim to the world that we have failed, she will certainly keep both her people and her Allies together, and with these advantages and a harvest, the yield of which will be increased by the Roumanian crops, she will, in 1918, be in a military position which will allow her to regard calmly the arrival of a dozen or so American Divisions on the Western Front, even if shipping is available to send and maintain them.

7. My opinion is that the risks of waiting are too great, and that we must bring every possible pressure to bear on the French to make them fight. General Smuts in a paper just circulated to the War Cabinet supports this view. He says, speaking of the Western Front, 'It is essential to our ends that we should keep the initiative and offensive, but both are enormously difficult in the situation in which we are placed on this front. . . . These impressions which I brought from the Front have since been reinforced by the rumour that several important members of the French Government do not approve of General Nivelle's present offensive, and consider a defensive policy the wisest one for the French Army to pursue. If this policy is carried out and is applied also to the British Army, it means that towards the end of the third year of war the enemy has still succeeded



in reducing us to the defensive. This, coupled with the fact that the enemy forces are now more numerous than ever before, that they have conquered large parts of Entente territory, which they are still holding, and that the submarine campaign, already so grave, is growing in violence, would look very much like our defeat, would dishearten all the Entente nations, whose discouragement might precipitate serious peace movements among one or more of them. And once the rot sets in, it might be difficult to stop it. No doubt the weight of America would be felt in 1918, but the danger is that we may not get there unless active operations are prosecuted, and a continuance of military success buoys up the spirit of the nations to fight on till America can come in as a decisive factor.'

8. If it should prove that we cannot persuade the French to fight, or if they agree to fight but we are not adequately satisfied that they really mean to do so and to the full extent of their power, we should as a *pis-aller* insist on their taking over a large part of our front and should continue our preparations for attacking in Belgium. I am by no means prepared to recommend now that that operation should be carried out if the French do nothing and if as many German troops are on the Western Front as are there now, as I doubt if it would be feasible in these circumstances.\* But it is very important that it should be undertaken

*Doubts about  
Flanders  
offensive*

\* The opinions expressed by the C.I.G.S. in this paragraph are quite inconsistent with the attitude he adopted in June when the question of a tremendous offensive to clear the Belgian coast was discerned and determined.

if reasonably practicable, and as the enemy may give us a chance we should be ready to take advantage of it. When all is said and done, there is really no satisfactory alternative to continuing the battle we and the French have started.

9. I have for a long time past urged on the War Cabinet the necessity of our taking much greater control over the War, for I have always felt that a time would come when the French Government would break down. They have broken down and the only remedy is for us to take charge and at once. I attach a note by Lieut.-General Wilson which supports this view."

In view of the scornful references to "the failure of the Nivelle offensive," which afterwards became one of the clichés of the Staff, it is interesting to record Sir William Robertson's *changing views of Nivelle offensive* deliberate summary of the result obtained, which he put on record a fortnight after the battle had been fought. In his opinion we had achieved "more than he had expected." Between the French and ourselves we had "made a much bigger hole in the German reserves than we had thought was possible in the time." So pleased was he with the progress made in this particular offensive that he was anxious to continue it. As to our general policy, he was back at the strategy of attrition. He had no other idea in his head except exhausting the enemy's reserves. He does not seem to have contemplated the possibility that we might at the same time be wasting our own men and that the success of attrition is a question of the balance of wastage. He was very pessimistic, even contemptuous, about American help. He also took a gloomy view of the

prospects and effect of the submarine attack. He thought that by 1918 the Allies could not spare the necessary shipping to bring over more than half a million Americans "and maintain them here." He contemplated that by that time we might have been starved into a bad peace. Robertson was a close friend of Jellicoe, and they worked in the most intimate co-operation. Both Jellicoe and Robertson took the German estimate of the probable outcome of the German submarine attack. That is the real significance of Robertson's references to shipping. It may account for his adhesion to the project of a Flanders campaign. In this memorandum he is not sanguine about its possibilities, but he regards it almost as a last desperate throw. He can think of no other. Meanwhile let the Nivelle offensive proceed.

I must add a word as to my own attitude at the time towards this offensive.

At the Rome Conference I tried in vain to dissuade my French colleagues from attempting another great offensive in France this year and I indicated clearly what the result would be. I urged an attack in another quarter, on the Italian Front. When they insisted on the redemption of our Chantilly bond, I could not withdraw the British signature and risk what might have been a rupture in the Alliance, especially as all our own military advisers took the French view. When Robertson supported the French thesis at Rome, he was in full possession of the detailed Nivelle modifications of the Chantilly scheme. At that Conference he was one of its most strenuous and stubborn advocates. When the Nivelle operation was the only one left on the board I did my utmost

*Harmony  
with Jellicoe*

*History of  
my attitude  
to Nivelle  
offensive*

to make it a success in transport, material and men—to the limit of our resources. I urged Unity of Command as an essential condition of success. That the first experiment was not a success was unfortunate. The facts I have related will enable those who have perused the miserable tale of folly, bickering, jealousy, tactlessness and sullenness to distribute the blame for the failure to achieve a better result. Unity of Direction had to be postponed until events compelled Generals to subordinate personal pride and national susceptibilities to the exigencies of a common cause in straits. It needed a greater disaster than the Nivelle disappointment to achieve this end. In spite of all that happened this offensive was for the British Army a distinct success—a much greater success than the Somme. It might have ended in a triumph had it been skilfully and resolutely exploited. But once more the “angels on horseback” had spoilt the feast.

Whether there was anything more to be gained by pressing on the attack which had commenced so auspiciously in our sector, was a question upon which I was not competent to express an opinion. I was strongly inclined to take the Pétain view that nothing considerable could be achieved by continuing the offensive on any considerable scale. But I knew that other Members of the Cabinet were of a different opinion, notably General Smuts, who had been sent over to the front by the Cabinet to report on the situation and who came back from his visit to Headquarters persuaded the Western offensive was the only military operation which was now open to us. I subsequently found that the majority of the Members of the War

*Cabinet desire  
for further  
offensives*

Cabinet were impressed by his ardent support of the Staff's estimate and advice.

At this time no rumours had reached us of serious trouble in the French Army. Its worst developments came later. Had he known what the exact condition of the French Army was at this date, I am convinced that General Smuts would have hesitated to throw over Pétain's sagacious counsel.

Both the Smuts and Robertson documents were circulated to the Cabinet and were considered at the meeting of 1st May. In the course of the discussion, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff read a letter from Sir Douglas Haig, in which he pointed out that at the moment some doubt existed as to who was the *de facto* Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, since General Nivelle was still the titular Commander-in-Chief, while General Pétain had been appointed as Chief of the Staff at the French Ministry of War. However this might be, the Field-Marshal had little doubt that the French Government was in control, and that their policy was defensive in character. He considered it would be useless for him to continue to press his present offensive vigorously if the French did not co-operate actively, and he proposed a modification in his plans to meet this situation.

The questions raised for decision at the War Cabinet were as follows :—

1. Should the British representatives at the forthcoming Anglo-French Conference press the French Government to pursue the policy of an active offensive?

2. What attitude should the British representatives adopt if the French should decline to take the offensive, or alternatively, if they should accept the obligation to undertake it, but show by their attitude that they did not intend to give full effect to their undertaking?

I summed up the arguments against further offensives on the Western Front this year, which weighed with Pétain and the French Government. The French, I pointed out, could claim that two very great Generals were opposed to the policy of a great offensive, namely, Generals Alexeieff and Pétain. The former had given his opinion that Russia could not undertake any large offensive this year, and consequently the Allies in the West would find themselves opposed to the great bulk of the German reserves, and by attacking would exhaust their man-power in an operation offering no prospect of success, thereby weakening their offensive capacity for 1918. General Pétain, the French could say, had accurately forecast the failure of General Nivelle's offensive, and believed in repeated surprise attacks designed on a less ambitious scale. The French would ask what prospect there was of a successful offensive on the Western Front this year. They would produce figures to show that the Germans had a superiority in heavy artillery, and that in numbers the Allies had no considerable superiority; in short, that the superiority of men and material necessary for a successful offensive was lacking. They would further urge that the blockade was telling on the enemy; that by 1918 the Russian situation would have cleared up definitely one way or the other, and that the United States of America would

be able to put half a million men in the field. Even if the shipping conditions did not enable the American Army to be transported to the Western Front, it could be sent to Russia, where American organisation would by that time have effected improvements in Russian transport conditions. They would advocate that for the present our policy on the Western Front should be defensive, and that in the meantime we should use our surplus strength to clear up the situation elsewhere—in Syria, for example—and to eliminate first Turkey, then Bulgaria, and finally, perhaps even Austria, from the War. They would, urge that, if the British Generals were confident now both they and the French Generals had time after time expressed confidence before previous offensives in the West, which had never yet succeeded. These, I pointed out, were considerations which could not lightly be dismissed, and I felt bound to admit that they made some appeal to me. Moreover, we could not disregard the possibility that in a few months' time we might be confronted with an insistent demand for peace. If Russia collapsed it would be urged that it might be beyond our power to beat Germany, as the blockade would become to a great extent ineffective, and the whole of the enemy's forces would become available to oppose the Western Allies. We could not contemplate with equanimity the prospect of entering a Peace Conference with the enemy in possession of a large slice of Allied territory, and before we had completed the conquest of Mesopotamia and Syria. General Pétain was said to be a very resolute and determined man, and he would be strongly supported by M. Painlevé. If they declined to co-operate they would practically take it out of our power to continue the

offensive, and we could not succeed unless a substantial part of the German reserves were drawn off. Finally,

*Our failing man-power* I reminded the War Cabinet that we had no reserve of man-power sufficient to sustain a combat with the bulk of the German reserves, until the United States of America could bring their strength to bear. I also reminded the War Cabinet that, to maintain our shipping at the barest minimum required to sustain the War, we required to realise a building programme of 3,000,000 gross tons, and we could not afford that men should be recruited from this or from the connected trades. Shipping was at present our weakest flank, and we could not afford to take men from shipbuilding. On the contrary, I had almost come to the conclusion, as the result of my enquiries during the past week, that we should be obliged to withdraw men from the Army for this purpose.

In stating the case as above, against the continuation of our offensive in the West, I made it clear that I was not myself committed to the arguments that I had expressed, but I considered that they required earnest consideration. This statement represented the view I then took of the military position and possibilities for 1917. I had, however, no support for this attitude and policy amongst my colleagues. In the course of the discussion that followed it was evident that the Cabinet as a whole took a different view from the one I stated.

*My colleagues oppose defensive policy* It was pointed out that, if the Allies contented themselves with a defensive policy in the West, or with the policy of small offensives generally attributed to General Pétain, which the Chief of the General Staff and General Smuts characterised as equivalent to a defensive



policy, the Germans would be able to release reserves for operations against Russia or Italy. Russia, it was generally agreed, was the weak point of the Alliance, but some difference of opinion was expressed as to whether the effect of a German offensive against Russia would be advantageous or the reverse. One view was that an attack might stiffen the Russian resistance and pull the whole nation together. Even admitting that the Allies had not much chance of breaking the German line this year, it was urged, nevertheless, that by continuing to hammer the enemy, we might bring them to a frame of mind in which they would agree to a peace on terms acceptable to the Allies. In this connection it was pointed out that Germany would probably reach almost the lowest point of depression and misery between now and the next harvest. The Allies, on the other hand, were still capable of making a great military effort. Later on, after a long continuance of submarine losses, though we probably should not be starved, we should be compelled, in order to supply the essential needs of the nation, to withdraw shipping from military purposes and consequently to reduce our military effort. To desist now would be to lose the moment when our own force was at a maximum and when the enemy's anxieties were most acute. It was further suggested that to relinquish our efforts at this period of the War would be to deal a fatal blow at the morale of the Allies. In this connection it was pointed out that the French Socialists had by only two votes rejected the invitation to an International Socialist Conference at Stockholm, to be attended by German Socialists, and summoned in the interests of peace. It is interesting to note that all the arguments for a strong offensive were based on the implicit assumption that America would

not be in a position next year to render the Allies such military assistance as to influence a decision.

General Smuts was very insistent on the moral aspect of the question. He considered that to relinquish the offensive in the third year of the War would be fatal, and would be the beginning of the end. It would be impossible to keep up the spirits of the people, and pessimism and despair would be rife among the Allies, while the Germans would be correspondingly cheered, and would have time to recover their spirits. He did not foresee any likelihood of our breaking the German line, but by remorselessly hammering away we might expect ultimately to bring the enemy to terms. If we could not break the enemy's front we might break his heart. It was hard on us and would involve heavy casualties, but, though it was a great misfortune, the Western Front was our problem and it could only be solved by this policy. For replacing losses we must rely ultimately on the United States of America, but to delay action until the United States could bring their strength to bear, that is to say, until the year 1918, might be a disastrous policy. Even if the French refused to take the offensive, we ought to be prepared to continue, and should insist on the French taking over the section of the line recently occupied by us to enable General Nivelle to take the offensive. Moreover, General Smuts assumed that the French would not remain entirely passive in any case. He considered that from a purely British point of view it would be better to attack in Flanders, where very important objects of British policy were to be achieved, in order to leave to the French the incentive to clear the enemy from France, an incentive which

which be lacking if the recent operations had resulted in driving the enemy across the Meuse.

The First Sea Lord pointed out that shipping might prove the decisive factor and undertook to investigate the transport facilities likely to be available to the United States in 1918.

On a review of the foregoing considerations the War Cabinet decided :—

1. That the British representatives at the Conference should press the French to continue the offensive.

*Cabinet  
decision to  
continue  
offensive*

2. If, after hearing General Pétain's views or after a conference between the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and General Pétain, they were not satisfied that the French offensive would prove effective, they should insist on our entire freedom of action and on the French Army reoccupying the trenches recently taken over by the British forces.

The Imperial War Cabinet was influenced by these considerations to support the advice given by the British military leaders that the best course to pursue in the immediate future was to continue the pressure on the Germans in France, in order to prevent them from releasing their troops for an offensive which would finally put a distracted Russia out of action, and also to make it impossible for Germany to send any divisions to the aid of the Austrians in the impending attack upon them by the Italians. In the sequel we found that the policy of an active offensive in the West achieved neither of these results, whilst it ended in colossal losses for our Army.

At the request of Sir Douglas Haig and Sir William

*Paris Conference on military policy* Robertson I accompanied them to Paris for the Conference held on 4th May, to discuss the whole situation with the French Government and the new Commander-in-Chief. Before the ministers and generals met, there was a military Conference held at the Ministry of War. At that Conference an agreement was reached, and a statement of the results was read at the mixed Conference of Ministers and Generals in the afternoon.

Here follows the copy of the statement by Sir William Robertson :—

“ 4th May, 1917.

I conferred this morning with Generals Pétain and Nivelle and Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig.

*Sir William Robertson's statement of conclusions* We reviewed the whole situation including the situation in Russia and Italy, and the entry of America into the War, and we arrived at the unanimous opinion that it is essential to continue offensive operations on the Western Front. A large portion of the enemy's reserves have already been exhausted by the French and British attacks. If the enemy is given time to recover, the fruits of this success will be lost. He will be free to attack either Russia or

*Offensive to continue* Italy, neither of whom are at present in a condition to resist an attack in great force. His present object is certainly to encourage his people to hold out until the submarine warfare has taken effect, and if he is left free to gain easy successes where he can, and allowed to proclaim to the world that he has defeated his two principal enemies, he will obtain this object.

This might be fatal to our chance of winning the War. We are, however, unanimously of opinion that the situation has changed since the plan for the offensive begun in April was agreed upon by the two Governments, and that this plan is no longer operative. It is no longer a question of aiming at breaking through the enemy's front and aiming at distant objectives. It is now a question of wearing down and exhausting the enemy's resistance, and if and when this is achieved, to exploit it to the fullest extent possible. In order to wear

*Policy of attrition*

him down we are agreed that it is absolutely necessary to fight with all our available forces with the object of destroying the enemy's divisions. We are unanimously of opinion that there is no half-way between this course and fighting defensively, which, at this stage of the War, would be tantamount to acknowledging defeat. We are all of opinion that our object can be obtained by relentlessly attacking with limited objectives, while making the fullest use of our artillery. By this means we hope to gain our ends with the minimum loss possible.

Having unanimously agreed to the above principles, we consider that the methods to be adopted to put them into practice, and the time and place of the various attacks, are matters which must be left to the responsible Generals, and that they should at once be examined and settled by them."

Then followed a discussion which in effect emphasized the agreement which had been reached.

General Pétain expressed entire concurrence, and said that the Generals were in agreement in detail as well as on general principle. Very shortly, the

position was to maintain an offensive by limited action with definite objectives, and the British General

made it clear that the full forces of the French and British Armies were to be employed for this end. This point was very emphatically elaborated by me. I

pointed out that both France and Great Britain were apt to underestimate the measure of success already achieved, because their standard of comparison was the high and possibly exaggerated hopes with which their offensive began.

I asked what would our feelings be if we had lost 45,000 prisoners, that is to say, practically five divisions of fighting men, 450 guns, including some of the heaviest calibre, about 800 machine-guns, had had 36 reserve divisions put out of action, and had lost 70 square miles of territory. Such a feeling of pessimism would have gone through both countries that it might have been difficult to keep the fighting spirit up. Captured documents showed that the Germans were short of material, and we knew that the food problem was much more serious for them than for us. We must go on hitting and hitting with all our strength until the German ended, as he always did, by cracking.

M. Ribot accepted my points. He said that to shut ourselves up on the defensive after three years of war would be a reckless and imprudent policy. We must press on with all our forces. But the question of effectives was really serious, especially for France, who had stood the brunt of the War practically alone until the British Army was ready. Therefore France must, although putting forth her full strength, guard against excessive losses.

I repeated that we were ready to put the full strength of the British Army into the attack, but it

## SEQUEL TO MARTELLE OFFENSIVE 1561

~~was the good thing as unless the French did the same.~~  
~~Otherwise, the German would bring his best men and guns~~  
~~and all his ammunition against the British Army and then~~  
~~later against the French.~~ Tentative and feeble attacks  
were really more costly in the end.

M. Painlevé said that the French Government were  
in complete agreement with my opinions, but thought  
the idea, which had grown since the last  
*French policy* offensive, that France now contemplated  
*defined* a passive offensive in order to save lives,  
should be put right. What the French  
Government really intended was to adopt the best  
method for using the full effect of the French resources  
and sacrifices with the minimum of loss, and he  
thought that the opinion of the Conference was unani-  
mous to continue to do the enemy the greatest possible  
amount of damage. The discussion ended by a  
mutual assurance of complete confidence in the  
British and French intentions to use their full strength.  
\* General Pétain adhered firmly to his policy of  
“limited” offensives. The strategy of the rupture  
which was the idea of the Champagne, Somme,  
Chemin des Dames and afterwards of the Flanders  
offensive, was thus definitely thrown over in favour  
of the policy of limited offensives with a definite  
objective, which was subsequently practised with such  
success by General Pétain at Moronvilliers and  
Verdun.

It will be noted that Sir William Robertson, at the  
Conference and after, accepted unreservedly the  
Pétain policy of “making the fullest use  
*Robertson in* of our artillery”—that meant the Pétain  
*favour of* scheme of saving your own men and  
*defensive tactics* wasting the enemy by heavy bombard-  
ment. The C.I.G.S. stated categorically that “it is

no longer a question of aiming at breaking through the enemy front and aiming at distant objectives." He thus by clear implication, ruled out the project of an offensive on a large scale to rupture the German lines in Flanders and clear the Belgian coast. That certainly could not be described as a limited offensive, with no distant objectives.

This is how matters were left as the result of the Paris Conference.



## CHAPTER LII

### THE PETROGRAD CONFERENCE

As the previous volumes indicate, I had made repeated efforts to induce the British Government to establish more direct and authoritative contact with Russia in order to ascertain the real position in that country, and to discover what was wrong in its equipment and organisation. I had also urged the holding of Allied Conferences at which Russia should be represented by her most responsible statesmen and soldiers. That was only possible by holding these gatherings occasionally in the East. With a retreating Army important Generals could not have spared the time to visit Paris. And the Czar, with whom rested the final decision, could not have left Russia. At

*Decision to  
hold the  
Conference*

last, at the Paris Conference held on the 15th and 16th November, 1916, it had been decided that, subject to the Czar's approval, such a Conference should be held at Petrograd in time to discuss and make the final arrangements for the 1917 campaign. The Government instructions to the Allied Delegations were to be "the united front," which included community of resources.

At the second meeting of the War Cabinet on 11th December, 1916, the question was discussed of making definite arrangements for a Conference of the Allied Governments and Military Staffs to be held in Russia,

as agreed at the Paris Conference in November. Our Foreign Office was instructed to inform our Allies that the British representatives would be ready to start immediately after Christmas.

Delays occurred however in settling the personnel of the delegations from the different countries. I attached great importance to securing an authoritative and impressive British delegation, whose representation would command respectful attention in Russia. On the civilian side I nominated Lord Milner. The only other alternative would have been Mr. Balfour, but he had not recovered from a severe attack of influenza. On the military side Sir Douglas Haig could not leave his command in France, Sir William Robertson, who was the alternative to Haig, would have gone sullenly and reluctantly, if at all. There was no other General available who had the necessary qualifications except Sir Henry Wilson, so he was chosen. He was a man of brilliant gifts but he had obvious defects which gave the impression of unreliability. Had his force of character been equal to the subtlety of his brain, he would have deserved and probably attained the highest position in the British Army. His complete knowledge of both the British and the French Armies on the Western Front specially qualified him for this Mission.

I urged the French Government to select a General whose status would be recognised by the Russians. Here is an extract from the Minutes of a discussion on the subject which took place at the London Inter-Allied Conference on December 28th :—

“THE PRIME MINISTER referred to the Petrograd Conference. It was proposed to leave

this country on the 9th January. His Majesty's Government hoped to be represented by a member of the War Cabinet and by one of their ablest Generals. They desired that the whole deputation should be as strong as possible, so as to bring Russia into line and secure *real* co-operation between the East and the West. He therefore hoped that the French Government would send a strong deputation.

M. RIBOT said that they would send a Cabinet Minister and a General of the first rank. General Castelnau had exhibited so marked a desire to be in active touch with the Army that there was no question of his going, and the French Government had thought that General Roques, the late Minister of War, might go.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that he was going to speak quite frankly and openly ; it was the only way to ensure complete confidence between the Allies. He felt that a merely complimentary deputation was useless. There had been many of them sent to Russia already. The representatives who were going on this occasion must not only have full powers, subject, of course, to the final decision of their Government, but be capable of exercising their full powers. Was General Roques being sent because he was the best man to discuss the 1917 campaign, or because the best men were busy elsewhere ? In the latter case the deputation would be a pretence and useless. It must have authority and capacity.

LORD CURZON said that, while appreciating the attitude of General Roques at previous Conferences, he was bound to say that the General had taken no very active part. What was wanted now

was the military mind of France, and he endorsed the wish of the Prime Minister to see a fighting General appointed to the deputation.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that it must be someone whom the Emperor of Russia and his advisers would listen to. There were unpleasant things that would have to be said and they must be said by someone who would be taken seriously. He begged the French Government to treat the deputation as a really serious matter. The General should be somebody of the status and prestige of General Castelnau. We were sending a Cabinet Minister and one of our most brilliant Generals. Unless the French deputation was of equal strength the onus of the discussions would fall on us, and the Conference might fail in its purpose. If the French Government did not assist to the utmost of their power, our difficulties would be greatly added to.

M. RIBOT was not afraid that the Russian Government would not listen. He feared that they would not execute their promises once the deputation had left Russia.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that they would not even listen unless those who spoke to them were people who could speak with authority. The only chance of a really great success in 1917 was completely effective co-operation with Russia, and the whole campaign might depend on the authority of the deputation now sent.

M. RIBOT said that he would inform his colleagues and he thanked the Prime Minister for the complete frankness that had been shown."

As a result of this short discussion, the French Government dropped the idea of sending General

Requested and chose General Castelnau as the head of the military section of their mission.

Then came a series of postponements—all of them ominous of trouble. The subterranean fires in Russia had already begun to break through the crust. News came of the assassination of Rasputin—the Czar's protégé and the Czarina's friend—by a cabal of young aristocrats. The anger of the Court found vent in a shifting of Ministers who had failed to protect the favourite. The rumbling underneath became louder, and the seething and spluttering of steam and boiling mud became everywhere more apparent and disquieting.

*Troubles in  
Russia cause  
further delay*

At the request of the Russian Government, the start of the Allied Mission was put off to the middle of January in the vain hope that the volcanic fires might subside. The next postponement was significant of further trouble. The Russians expressed the desire that the visit should be further postponed, on the ground that the Duma was due to meet on 25th January, and as its first sessions were expected to be stormy the Russian Government therefore preferred that the Allied Conference should not begin its deliberations till at least three or four sessions of the Duma had taken place. In fact, the air of the Russian capital became so charged with sulphurous exhalations that the opening of the Duma was postponed for a month, to keep out the lava from surging in hot fury around the Conference doors. Its first meeting was actually held on 27th February, a week after the Allied Conference had concluded. In another fortnight the revolutionary crater had opened, and the fires are still reddening the Eastern sky.

The representatives of Britain, France and Italy

foregathered in England on 19th January, 1917, and sailed from Oban for Russia two days later. At this first Conference on the Eastern side of the battlefield, the Western Powers were represented by able men on the civilian side and by at least two men of distinction on the military side. The principal British representatives were Lord Milner, a member of the War Cabinet ; General Sir Henry Wilson for the Army ; Lord Revelstoke, as an authority on Finance, and Sir Walter Layton on Munitions. Sir George Buchanan, the British Ambassador in Russia, attended the Conference as a diplomatic representative. In addition there were a number of special delegates to discuss different problems. The French delegation was led by M. Doumergue, an ex-Premier and a future President of the Republic, and again a Premier, and General Castelnau, one of France's greatest soldiers. The Italian delegation had Signor Scialoja at its head. It was the first time during the War that the Allies had conferred together on the Eastern Front. It was the first time after these years of war that East, as well as West, had been authoritatively represented at a Conference on any front. And now, alas, it was too late as far as Russia was concerned, to repair the blunders due to lack of co-ordination.

The party reached Petrograd on 29th January, and the Commission on Supplies started work the following afternoon. The first plenary session of the Conference was held on 1st February. Altogether the various meetings of the full conference and of the separate Commissions were spread out over three weeks, the concluding session being held on the afternoon of 20th February, 1917. In the

*The delegations  
sail. Their  
constitution*

*Duration of  
the Conference*

intervals between their meetings the members of the Allied Mission travelled about in Russia and tried to get a first-hand impression of its conditions, discussing matters with leading Russians and with their own agents and representatives in the country.

The Mission re-embarked at Romanoff on the Murmansk coast on 25th February, reaching Scapa Flow on 2nd March. Ten days later the Russian Revolution began, and on 15th March, Czar Nicholas II abdicated.

The evidence collected by our representatives and the points which emerged in the course of the Conference show forcibly how great was the *Lack of Allied co-operation exposed* need for a closer co-operation between Russia and her Western Allies, and how deplorable were the consequences of Russian ineptitude and Western selfishness. The casual and inefficient methods of the Russian autocracy were well known to the West ; but the Mission now realised fully for the first time how the selfish and stupid concentration of the military authorities of France and Britain on their own fronts, and their consequent neglect to give studied and timely thought to the difficulties and deficiencies of their Eastern Ally, had contributed to the confusion and ruin which was so soon to end in the utter collapse of Russia.

They found Russia in a deplorable state of disorganisation, muddle and disorder, rent with faction, permeated with German propaganda and espionage, eaten up with corruption. *Lord Milner's comments on organisation of Conference* As to the Conference itself, Lord Milner reported in a confidential note to the War Cabinet that :—

“ The proceedings of the plenary meetings of

the Conference were of the most jejune and superficial character. . . . The whole thing was exceedingly ill-arranged."

A large and miscellaneous crowd of people was allowed to be present, and perhaps the most ominous note in Milner's report is the reason he assigns for their inability to discuss things seriously at the Conference—the lack of secrecy and the prevalence of espionage.

"It was obviously impossible to discuss anything of a confidential nature before more than forty persons, many of whom we did not know at all, and one or two of whom we had a certain amount of reason to suspect. . . ."

A report made by another member of the Delegation noted that there were three groups of opinion in the country, of which the first was the pro-Germans,

"whose sympathies and interests are entirely German. These people are recruited from the Court, the Civil Service, and the business community. If they could they would end the War to-morrow. They belong to the reactionaries, and profess to believe that Russian and German interests are identical, and must always remain so."

*Pro-Germanism  
in Russia*

This observer also noted that :—

"While goods are still being imported into Russia from enemy countries, it is just as certain



that sums of money are being paid by German agents to Government officials. Probably this was done in the case of the Murman Railway, where the conflicting interests of the Archangel railway and port, assisted by German money, contrived to prevent the construction of an efficient railway to Kola."

In explanation of this point it may be said that our representatives found the port of Kola or Romanoff had an unloading capacity of 1,500 tons a day, but the railway could not move 600 tons a day from it, and in mid-May it would have to be closed for the summer for repairs.

This evidence shows the comparative freedom with which German agents and propaganda were able to operate in the country.

During the discussions it became clear from the outset that the Russians had decided to place in the forefront of their demands at the Conference the implementing of M. Briand's phrase about "the common front" and "the pooling of resources." They crystallised their plea into a request for the fixation, for each of the Allies, of "a minimum equipment" on the condition of carrying out their part of the general offensive. A reasonable and practical proposition, but coming—oh, so late. Why was it not made at the very beginning of the War? But one of the unsolved mysteries of this War will always be—why those who were responsible for directing it never met to confer as to their strategy until February, 1917, when it was too late to amend the most calamitous strategical errors. M. Pokrovski, the Russian Foreign Minister, opened the proceedings

*Russians plead  
for pooling  
of resources*

with a formulation of the new Russian claim upon the Allies :—

“ Our [the Allied] joint resources in men, in material, in products of every kind,” he said, “ exceed too obviously those of our enemy for victory to be uncertain. All the same, our military situation is as yet far from being all that it ought to be. . . . It is essential that the initiative in operations shall be captured from the enemy and maintained by the Allies. We shall only keep it by an activity that is continuous and incessant on all fronts. For that we have got to distribute as usefully and intelligently as possible all our resources—men and materials—and thus assure from them the biggest return. *That, gentlemen, is one of the objects, in fact the principal object, of our meetings.*”

General Alexeieff, the ablest strategist of all the Russian Generals, was unable to be present, partly through ill-health. His place was taken by General Gourko, the Russian Chief of Staff. He also was reputed to be a good soldier. He spoke next after M. Pokrovski, and stressed the same point :—

“ The Russian High Command regards the co-ordination of the Allied efforts as the essential and necessary condition of success. . . . To enable the Allies to carry to success the operations which will be decided on, they will have to investigate and discover how to distribute as usefully as possible the resources at their disposal. In this connection it is impossible to emphasise enough the importance of the principle of pooling our resources.”

The importance of this principle was clearly recognised by Lord Milner, and he underlined it in a Confidential Note which he prepared while in Russia and passed over to Pokrovski and to the Czar, for the purpose of intimating to them his view on matters which it had been difficult to thrash out in the crowded open session. In this Note he said :—

*Lord Milner's  
note to Russian  
Government*

“ The way I look at it is this : we are face to face with a supreme emergency ; we are all absolutely in one boat, and have got to sink or swim together. There can be no thought of the individual interests of the Allied nations—they have all one supreme interest : Victory. . . .

The only point from which we ought to look at the matter is that of the total strength of the Allies. Subject to the inexorable physical necessities governing the transfer of men and things, all the men, all the material, all the money at the disposal of any of the Allies ought to be employed at that point where they can be employed with the most effect. . . . *It might be good policy to sacrifice some addition of strength on the Western Front for the purpose of supplying Russia's urgent needs. For it is at least possible that an amount of material which would not make any vital difference to the result of the clash of enormous armaments on the Western Front might make the whole difference between success and failure on the Eastern Front.\** This is a consideration of great weight, and one which would naturally incline us to give priority of consideration to Russia's needs at the present time. . . .”

\* My italics.